

# Understanding Cultural Factors in Food Consumption: An Experiential Case Study of Consumers at an Ethnic Restaurant

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## Abstract:

*This anthropological study examines the behaviors of consumers in an ethnic environment to demonstrate the level of awareness of cultures other than one's own. Previous studies have identified that consumers' cultural awareness in ethnic restaurants may influence their behaviors for various reasons. This case study of a Mexican restaurant in South Carolina supports previous studies of cultural influences on consumer behaviors by using a mixed ethnographical methodology. Although these findings are meaningful to managers of ethnic restaurants, further investigation is needed to form theoretical implementations from previous and current findings.*

## Introduction

The term "consumer behavior" refers to consumers' responses to products and services and the ways in which those products and services are presented. In order to understand consumers and the choices they make, researchers must investigate a range of human responses including, but not limited to, affective (feelings), cognitive (thoughts), and behavioral (actions) responses. It has been suggested that the core concept in an anthropological approach to marketing research is culture, as culture is the underlying dimension of all societies. In order to produce concrete results, researchers must understand the reasoning behind societal actions, including the culture from which actions are derived (Kardes 2002; Senguder 2000; Tian 2000, 2001a, 2001b).

Dr. Robert Guang Tian and his colleagues suggest that to understand human responses one must first understand the culture within which the consumer behavior takes place. The extent to which consumers understand culture influences their behavior and purchasing decisions. Buying products is one way consumers gain cultural meaning and establish self-identities. One approach to an analysis of consumer behavior is "cross-cultural interpretation," meaning that there are differences in cultural norms and values between countries which can be illustrated by studying food consumption. The beliefs and attitudes a culture has about food consumption influence the food choices consumers make; this is particularly meaningful in studying consumer behavior at ethnic restaurants. Food habits and consumption represent ethnic, regional, and national identities, and differ from country to country due to cultural differences (Bailey and Tian 2002; Tian 2001a; Witte and Tian 2003).

Restaurants may be one of the best places to study consumer behavior; in this environment, research can be conducted by observing food consumption and the interactions between consumers and waiters/waitresses and/or other employees. Restaurants also are ideal for studying concepts and theories related to consumer behavior such as consumption/motivation, friends/family influences on consumer behavior, and cultural influences on consumer behavior (Senguder 2000; Tian 2001a). Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisines may be the best-known ethnic cuisines in the United States. Due to their growing popularity, people do not feel as strongly that they are ethnic cuisines, because such foods have become commonplace, more available, and are found in non-ethnic restaurants and multicultural grocery stores nationwide. Susan Mills (2000) observes that today's consumers desire a good overall restaurant experience, including friendly service, flavorful foods, and a good overall experience, whether it be in a typically American restaurant or an ethnic restaurant. Restaurants are also the primary source of ethnic cuisine education for consumers. As a result, those who dine at an ethnic restaurant with little knowledge about that cuisine often judge the entire cuisine on a favorable or unfavorable dining experience, which ultimately determines whether or not they opt to eat it again (Frozen Food Digest 1995).

A segmentation study on ethnic restaurants done by the National Restaurant Association found that diners tend to fall into three distinctly different categories: Culture-Oriented, Restaurant-Oriented, and Preparation-Oriented. Culture-Oriented consumers actively seek out new dining adventures; Restaurant-Oriented consumers view ethnic restaurants as simply another eating-out alternative; Preparation-Oriented consumers' interests in ethnic cuisine tend to center on cooking and ingredients (Frozen Food Digest 1995).

These categories are similar to those found in Mills' (2000) study. When consumer behavior is combined with attitudes about ethnic cuisine, two divisions between ethnic-cuisine supporters can be made: Internationalists and Urban Professionals. Internationalists seek out foreign experiences; they want authenticity and are more inclined to have a taste for hot and spicy foods, such as Mexican and Thai. They look for the whole experience, from décor to servers who speak the restaurant's native language. Urban Professionalists tend to be older than Internationalists; they like to experiment with new cuisines but watch what they eat and like menus to specify clearly what is in their foods. These categories and segments are formed because Americans tend to differ in terms of how they relate to ethnic cuisines (Bailey and Tian 2002; Mills 2000; Tian 2001a; Witte and Tian 2003).

Food choice based on price is derived from culture meanings based in social status. American culture, including that of the southern regions, has been transformed into one that ranks food consumption solely on financial sacrifice. The connotations of *filet mignon* and lobster convey the meaning of high social status and high prices. Fatback and chicken-necks portray the lower income and social status of its consumers (Pillsbury 1998).

Southern culture has its own food style. Fried chicken and okra are often associated with the South. The diet of southern America consists of a lot of vegetables and fruits prepared in creative ways which include jellies and pickling, whether it is cucumbers, eggs, or other foods. Rice is a primary component in many traditional Southern dishes and is considered a staple in many "home-cooked" meals (Gabaccia 1998). Rice is also a common component in Mexican dishes.

Familiar food helps develop an identity among the people of the ethnic group, thus forming a relationship through food culture. Southern food is a product of the region's history. American Indians and African-Americans introduced many of the typical vegetables and plants of Southern cuisine such as black-eyed peas and okra. The combination of available ingredients and preparation has formed a well-established method of cooking easily identified with Southern culture (Bailey and Tian 2002; Tian 2001a; Witte and Tian, 2003).

Mexican food culture is also a product of history. Mexican food is a mix of *mestizo* and Spanish influences. Culinary revolutions in Mexico date back to 1521 with the discovery of indigenous foods such as

chocolate, peanuts, vanilla, beans, squash, avocados, chilies, coconuts, corn, and tomatoes. These foods, still present in Mexican cuisine, resemble those eaten by the Aztecs centuries ago. Throughout the centuries, Mexican cuisine has constantly been enriched by influences from many different countries. This intermingling of food cultures created "Tex-Mex," a blend of Northern Mexican, Southwestern U.S., and American Indian cuisines. The cuisines of these countries were melded together into new specialties and became what we today call Mexican cuisine (Mexican Food to Go 2002).

Cuisines have different appeals, meaning that consumers see some as exotic and innovative and others not. Mexican cuisine falls into Mills' (2000) "Basic Family" category, which represents a "safe" core of the ethnic-cuisines market that appeals to almost all consumers. Mexican cuisine is highly familiar in the United States and is good for eating out with children; therefore, consumers choose it regularly. Mexican cuisine also falls into the "Convenience and Value" category because it is especially attractive to consumers who choose ethnic cuisine for convenience and good value (Mills 2000).

Differences are apparent between American food culture and Mexican food culture; however, Don Pablo's, a Mexican restaurant located in South Carolina, has been very successful in pleasing American consumers. From a marketing perspective the purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:

- Why do Americans go to culturally different restaurants?
- How culturally aware are consumers about Mexican culture and cuisine?
- Do consumers go to Mexican restaurants for the food, the price, or the experience?
- How does this particular restaurant attract American consumers?

## The Study

This study develops an understanding of consumer behavior as it relates to food culture and consumption using an ethnographic approach; it follows the model constructed in one of the premier pilot studies of cultural awareness and consumer behavior in the field of food consumption by Tian (2001). In that study, Tian indicated that food consumption habits are important to the study of culture and consumer behavior and contributes to the food and dining decisions

consumers make. Food consumption is a defining factor in a culture; therefore, a restaurant setting is an ideal place for observation and the exchange of cultural values and ideas. This research examines how Mexican culture has been adapted in southern America via a Don Pablo's restaurant in a large city that is 790 square miles with a population of 386,693. Only 3.8 percent of the population is Hispanic; about 26.2 percent graduated from college, and 11.7 percent are considered elderly (U.S. Census 2002). Through a comprehensive literature review pertaining to food consumption and patterns, the assumption is made that southern Americans would accept Mexican food if it was comparable to food already accepted and familiar to American and southern American cuisine.

Three methods of data collection are used: observations, surveys, and interviews, which allow the author to collect more accurate data for comparison. This paper covers only the most interesting results in order to condense the information into a comprehensible length. There are also quite a few published reviews about Don Pablo's, an important source of information for understanding consumer behavior and what they do and do not like about this restaurant.

### **The Restaurant**

The franchise of Don Pablo's has more than 120 restaurants located along the East Coast and Texas. It first opened in Lubbock, Texas, in 1985 and expanded to the east. It was well-received because of its exceptional "made-from scratch" cooking and friendly service. The specific Don Pablo's being studied is located in a large city in South Carolina. The restaurant is on a main road that serves as an entrance to the city's largest mall, a road leading to the highway, and a path leading to many other businesses and corporations. The restaurant is directly across the street from that mall and is in front of a hotel. It is centered between a large, popular bookstore and a strip mall. The restaurant sign is right by the road and is brightly colored. The sign is also lit in bright, attractive colors when it is dark outside. The parking lot, however, is not so well-organized. There are not enough spaces to accommodate a large crowd, and customers of the bookstore and the strip mall often share the spaces. The spaces are also difficult to get in and out of when the lot is full.

Once inside, the atmosphere of Don Pablo's is "fun" and "festive," as described by interviewed consumers. Authentic Mexican music plays in the background, and

the hostess offers a warm and friendly greeting. The décor utilizes bright colors; strings of colored lights hang by the ceiling, bright mosaic tiles are on the table tops, and pictures and murals hang on the stone walls. In the center of the restaurant is a large, functional fountain surrounded by live plants and two-person tables to give the area a romantic feel. A Mexican tortilla stand is positioned within the dining area where customers can observe the making of fresh, warm flour tortillas.

The layout of the restaurant's dining area is spacious, allowing for privacy for the customers and movement for the waitstaff to reach each table without invading the personal space of others. Smoking is allowed in the back of the restaurant Monday through Saturday in an area which consists of three tables and two booths. There is no smoking on Sundays within the dining area of the restaurant because Sundays are popular for large groups and church-going consumers. By making the dining area completely nonsmoking there is more room to accommodate large parties. Patrons who wish to smoke on Sunday must sit in the bar area or on the patio. The music is played at a medium volume to support the illusion of a real Mexican cantina and create a lively atmosphere. The volume is audible, but not so loud as to interfere with conversations. Persons of different ethnic groups and backgrounds were observed eating at Don Pablo's. No matter what the ethnicity or background, all seemed comfortable with the environment.

The restaurant is open to customers from 11:00 AM to 10:00 PM, Sunday through Thursday and 11:00 AM to 11:00 PM Friday and Saturday. The lunch menu is available on weekdays until 4:00 PM. All meals begin with a basket of corn tortilla chips and a bowl of salsa. Lunch items are served with adequate portions that are priced lower than dinner items. Sunday lunch is the busiest time of the week. People have to sit in the small waiting area for a table while the hostess takes names. The servers must quickly take drink orders, fill food orders, and clear tables. Sunday lunch is also the most predictable time for large groups that usually come in after church services. When the wait is long the managers take orders to help the servers.

Dinner service begins at 5:00 PM. Once it begins to get dark outside, lights are dimmed and small lanterns are turned on at the booths aligning the walls. This gives the restaurant a softer, more romantic and relaxed atmosphere. The food is more expensive, but the proportions are larger, and customers usually take some food home with them, an indication that Mexican

food is filling and well-liked enough by customers that they save some for later. There are approximately 32 tables (four of which are located by the fountain) and 18 booths: 11 four-person booths and 7 six-person booths. The space between tables allows for a feeling of intimacy and privacy. The restaurant can serve up to 204 people, assuming that every seat is occupied. The restaurant can accommodate large parties by pushing tables together. When this is done there is still enough room for the servers to move around and take orders and enough space to provide privacy from surrounding tables. A waiting area was specially designed adjacent to the bar for people waiting for takeout orders or waiting to get a table during the rush.

Customers order from an extensive menu of more than 100 entrees. This includes a variety of Mexican dishes consisting of *acapoco* beef (spiced ground beef), chicken, pork, and vegetables, which accommodate vegetarian customers nicely. There are also a variety of Mexican desserts to choose from ranging from apple pie in a fajita skillet to traditional *sopapillas*. A children's menu is also available which offers both Mexican foods and traditional children's favorites, such as hot dogs and chicken fingers.

More than 20 servers rotate shifts on weekdays and weekends: four chefs, four hostesses (two work at a

time on weekends), one dishwasher, one tortilla maker, one busser, one food runner, one general manager, three assistant managers, and two bartenders. The restaurant has been in business for more than 7 years and was previously an Irish restaurant. The servers are primarily American-Caucasian with the exception of four who are of Hispanic origin. The cooks are all of Hispanic origin as are the bussers, dishwashers, tortilla makers, and one hostess. There is diversity among the employees and the customers can easily recognize the ethnicity within the restaurant.

### The Methodology and the Study Process

This study examines the degree of southern Americans' understanding about Mexican culture, particularly food culture, by observing and analyzing consumer behavior at a Don Pablo's restaurant. The study of food is a subjective process. Surveys, interviews, and observations were used in this study to collect and measure data and analyze and predict behaviors. These methods are commonly used to predict cultural awareness, behavior, and attitudes toward other cultures and ethnic groups and are particularly well-suited to research in an ethnic restaurant.

**Table 1. Observed Consumer Structure: Males Vs. Females**

| Consumers           | <u>Lun. 9/10/02 12:30 PM</u> |        | <u>Din. 9/13/02 6:30 PM</u> |        | <u>Lun. 9/13/02 1:30 PM</u> |        | <u>Din. 9/24/02 6:15 PM</u> |        |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------|
|                     | Male                         | Female | Male                        | Female | Male                        | Female | Male                        | Female |
| Total               | 18                           | 28     | 32                          | 35     | 17                          | 24     | 23                          | 18     |
| <u>By Ethnicity</u> |                              |        |                             |        |                             |        |                             |        |
| African-American    | 2                            | 11     | 1                           | 1      | 0                           | 0      | 1                           | 1      |
| Asian               | 1                            | 0      | 0                           | 0      | 0                           | 0      | 0                           | 0      |
| Caucasian           | 13                           | 17     | 31                          | 34     | 16                          | 24     | 22                          | 17     |
| Mexican             | 0                            | 0      | 0                           | 0      | 1                           | 0      | 0                           | 0      |
| Other               | 2                            | 0      | 0                           | 0      | 0                           | 0      | 0                           | 0      |
| <u>By Dress</u>     |                              |        |                             |        |                             |        |                             |        |
| Business Attire     | 5                            | 6      | 0                           | 0      | 0                           | 10     | 0                           | 5      |
| Casual Attire       | 13                           | 22     | 32                          | 35     | 17                          | 14     | 23                          | 13     |

The restaurant's policy is that food is served in a timely manner. Beverages must come out within three minutes of ordering and the meal within 15 (except for fajitas and the Conquistador, which take longer to prepare). Don Pablo's has a general manager and three assistant managers who all work within the restaurant. One member of management is in the dining area at all

times; another is in the kitchen to ensure speedy preparation and arrival of food. The kitchen is well-organized, which allows the cooks to freely reach the supplies and ingredients they need. There is also plenty of room for the servers to move around and pick up food and beverages. Chip and beverage alcoves are located for the servers' convenience.

Table 2 represents the demographic structure of the customers who filled out the survey. More males dine at this restaurant, primarily with colleagues, during the workweek. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), 79.5 percent of residents 25 years and older in this area have a high-school education or less; 26.2 percent of residents 25 years and older have a college and/or post-college degree. The majority of the customers surveyed have a college and/or post-college degree, a result of the surveys being handed to customers who work at local businesses. This also explains why the results show a high number of white-collar workers and a low number of blue-collar workers surveyed.

The survey focused on cultural ideology and values held by southern Americans about Mexican culture. Questions such as: How much do you agree with the statement, "Food consumption reflects cultural difference," "The food at this restaurant is authentic Mexican food," and "Would you consider having a

party or social gathering here?" were included to help researchers gain an understanding of the customers who frequented the restaurant. A total of 19 questions were used in a two-page survey: three measured customers knowledge about Mexican food culture, 7 measured customer opinions about the restaurant, and 9 identified the customer by gender, ethnic background, religion, education, occupation, if they generally came for lunch or dinner, and if they generally dined alone or accompanied.

The survey used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" to score the answers. We administered 110 surveys to individuals in area businesses and schools. Originally the customers were to be given the survey; however, the managers wanted the customers to have a relaxing dining experience and felt the surveys would intrude upon their privacy. The individuals who completed the surveys had all dined at the specific Don Pablo's and answered the questions accordingly.

**Table 2. A Demographic Structure of Surveyed Customers (n=110)**

|                      | <u>Dinner Users</u> |       | <u>Lunch Users</u> |       | <u>Total</u> |       |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|--------------|-------|
|                      | M (%)               | F (%) | M (%)              | F (%) | M (%)        | F (%) |
| Total                | 22                  | 26    | 30                 | 22    | 52           | 48    |
| <u>By Education</u>  |                     |       |                    |       |              |       |
| High School          | 9                   | 14    | 8                  | 17    | 17           | 31    |
| College              | 11                  | 7     | 12                 | 7     | 23           | 14    |
| Post-Graduate        | 6                   | 1     | 6                  | 2     | 12           | 3     |
| <u>By Occupation</u> |                     |       |                    |       |              |       |
| Blue Collar          | 0                   | 0     | 2                  | 0     | 2            | 0     |
| White Collar         | 16                  | 10    | 26                 | 22    | 42           | 32    |
| Students & Other     | 7                   | 14    | 1                  | 2     | 8            | 16    |
| <u>By Company</u>    |                     |       |                    |       |              |       |
| No Company           | 2                   | 0     | 3                  | 1     | 5            | 1     |
| With Friends         | 3                   | 4     | 22                 | 11    | 25           | 15    |
| With Families        | 17                  | 21    | 5                  | 11    | 22           | 34    |

Of the 110 surveyed customers, 25 were willing to be interviewed and answer 8 open-ended questions (Table 3). The customers were randomly selected from the 110 surveyed and were willing to take a maximum of 30 minutes to answer the questions. Among the 25 interviewed, 6 were college students who frequented the restaurant. The interviews consisted of questions such as: "What are three things that you will NOT do

at this restaurant, but you may do at a typical American restaurant?" "How will you describe this restaurant to me to draw my interest to this restaurant," and "Do you believe this restaurant reflects Mexican culture? Why or why not?" The data collected through interviews is used to facilitate the discussion and, from a management point of view, to help make improvements to the restaurant based on what the consumer wants.

**Table 3. Interviewed Customers: Gender/Age and Education (n=25)**

| Age/Gender<br>Education | 0-19 |   | 20-35 |   | 36-45 |   | 46-64 |   | 65- |   | Total |    |
|-------------------------|------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-----|---|-------|----|
|                         | M    | F | M     | F | M     | F | M     | F | M   | F | M     | F  |
| High School             | 1    | 2 | 1     | 2 | 0     | 0 | 1     | 2 | 0   | 0 | 3     | 6  |
| College                 | 1    | 1 | 2     | 2 | 1     | 1 | 0     | 1 | 1   | 1 | 5     | 6  |
| Post-Graduate           | 0    | 0 | 1     | 0 | 1     | 1 | 1     | 0 | 0   | 1 | 3     | 2  |
| Total                   | 2    | 3 | 4     | 4 | 2     | 2 | 2     | 3 | 1   | 2 | 11    | 14 |

**Findings and Discussion**

According to a previous study conducted by Tian (2001a), eating is not the only reason for going to an ethnic restaurant. Rather, the whole process of the greeting, ordering, dining, and interacting contribute to an overall favorable experience which leads to a greater awareness of culture. Observation is an excellent method for interpreting such cultural awareness and interaction. The purpose of our observation was to gain an understanding of the types of people who often visit Don Pablo’s on the basis of gender, occupation, age, and ethnic background.

Based on observations, the consumers and their consumption behaviors at this particular restaurant vary in different situations, such as males differ from females, etc. One interesting observation is that in family groups, one parent, typically the mother, orders on behalf of children. This observation is common in ethnic restaurants and suggests that American children who come to the restaurant with their parents may be unfamiliar with the taste of ethnic food unless they have been to the restaurant several times. This is not true in typical American restaurants where kids are familiar with the food and order for themselves.

It was observed that couples generally came for dinner for more formal and intimate interactions, while colleagues usually came for lunch and engaged in casual conversation. Occasionally business meetings were held at the restaurant at lunch times, and for large meetings tables were pulled together. The atmosphere is quiet enough to conduct business without distraction. The waitstaff took orders and brought the

food out quickly, and did not interrupt while the business meeting went on. Individuals were also observed reading recently purchased books (known by the presence of shopping bags and receipts). The atmosphere was pleasant and quiet enough for individuals to dine and enjoy their books.

Based on an observation listed in Table 4, a female consumer returned a chicken taco salad because it was too spicy for her liking. This suggests that some southern American consumers are not used to spicy foods, which are common in Mexican cuisines. This is a cultural difference in regard to the types of ingredients and spiciness of ethnic foods compared with the fried food and bland tastes of typical southern American foods. In general, when ethnic cuisine is introduced to the South it is well-accepted by some, while others find it too different from their normal tastes and cuisines.

Another observation was that of a family that requested a Spanish-speaking server. On another visit, which showed that they were loyal customers, we were able to interview the family and ask them why they preferred a Spanish-speaking server. The man replied that they were interested in Spanish culture and wanted to learn the language and have their children exposed to a culture that is growing rapidly in the South. They felt that this particular restaurant was family-oriented and the décor representative of a Mexican cantina. This observation is extremely important when looking at cultural awareness of Southern consumers. Consumers are aware of Mexican culture and would like to gain a better understanding of it (Table 4).

**Table 4. Observations and Interpretations**

| Date & Time                          | Observations   | Interpretations  |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Thursday Dinner<br>(9/19/02) 7:00 PM | A woman asks the server if the chicken taco salad is spicy. The server says no, but when the woman's salad comes out she returns it because it is too spicy for her. The salad is deducted from her check. | The tastes of the woman and server are different. The woman perhaps has never been to a Mexican restaurant before and is not used to the spicy foods.  |
| Sunday Lunch<br>(10/6/02) 12:00PM    | Larger groups, especially extended families come in after church and pray before they eat their meal.  | Christians get together after church services for further social interactions with family and friends.   |
| Sunday Lunch<br>(10/6/02) 1:00PM     | A family of four, the dad orders for the family in Spanish to a Spanish-speaking server.   | The dad sees the restaurant as an opportunity to practice his Spanish. They come to the restaurant for the cultural experience.  |
| Friday Dinner<br>(10/11/02) 8:00PM   | A couple and two children come in and ask the hostess for a Spanish-speaking server. The hostess seats them in a section. Throughout the meal they ask the server how to say certain words in Spanish.     | They are interested in Mexican and Spanish culture and want to learn more about it and subject their children to cultural influences.  |
| Saturday Lunch<br>(10/19//02) 2:00PM | A couple and an elderly woman come in, are seated, and do not open their menus. When the server approaches the man orders for himself and the other two ladies.  | They are loyal and frequent customers and perhaps have a favorite dish that they order every time. Perhaps the man knows more about Mexican food than the ladies and orders a meal they will like. |
| Tuesday Lunch<br>(10/22/02) 12:30PM  | A business meeting was arranged with a party of 6 people. The party stays for two hours.   | They didn't come for the food alone but for the pleasant, quiet atmosphere in which they could hold a meeting during their lunch break.  |

The data collected through the survey helped verify the observations and further analysis about consumers' cultural awareness. Questions 11-18 contained variables processed by a cross-tabulation analysis. Categories such as gender, meal, education, company, and occupation were analyzed to examine relationships between these categories and cultural sensitivity. This study found that the relationship between gender and food culture beliefs is correlated to a certain degree. The survey data indicated that, generally speaking, females tended to be slightly more aware of cultural differences and know more about Mexican food culture than did males, but only by a slight distribution. For example, approximately 70 percent of males agreed that food reflects cultural differences, which is equal to the 70 percent of females that also agreed. However, differences occurred when asked whether or not they agreed that American food culture is greatly influenced by Mexican food culture. Twenty-six percent of male respondents agreed to this statement, whereas 30 percent of female respondents agreed. Also, when asked whether or not they agreed that they visited this particular restaurant not only for

the food but for the cultural experience, 19 percent of male respondents agreed, compared to 28 percent of females (Table 5).

In this and a similar (2001), study Tian noted that the dates and times consumers visit a restaurant influenced their consumption behaviors and patterns. Expectations differ between lunch and dinner consumers. Both crowds were avid visitors and were satisfied with the service. According to observations and interviews lunch times were busier, mainly due to a large crowd of businessmen/women on their lunch break, and service was expected to be quicker. Dinner consumers came for intimate social gatherings with friends and dates and expected an atmosphere quiet enough for conversation. They usually did not mind that service was slower because they were not in a hurry. Forty-seven percent of dinner consumers who responded to the questionnaire-survey felt that dinner was a time to relax and enjoy conversation and the surroundings and expected the service to be slower and less intrusive.

**Table 5. Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness: Males (n=57) Vs. Females (n=53)**

| Question Contents   | <u>S. Agree</u> |    | <u>Agree</u> |    | <u>Neutral</u> |    | <u>Disagree</u> |    | <u>S. Disagree</u> |   |
|---|-----------------|----|--------------|----|----------------|----|-----------------|----|--------------------|---|
|   | M               | F  | M            | F  | M              | F  | M               | F  | M                  | F |
| Food reflects cultural differences                            | 5               | 5  | 35           | 32 | 7              | 7  | 10              | 9  | 0                  | 0 |
| American food culture influenced by Mexican food culture      | 1               | 0  | 14           | 16 | 13             | 11 | 24              | 23 | 5                  | 3 |
| The staff provides good service                               | 24              | 21 | 31           | 24 | 2              | 0  | 0               | 0  | 0                  | 0 |
| Prices are reasonable   | 15              | 16 | 39           | 34 | 3              | 1  | 0               | 2  | 0                  | 0 |
| Service provided reflects Mexican cultural values             | 0               | 1  | 28           | 24 | 11             | 16 | 18              | 12 | 0                  | 0 |
| Food provided is authentic Mexican food                       | 1               | 3  | 14           | 17 | 31             | 22 | 10              | 11 | 1                  | 0 |
| Visiting not for food but for the Mexican cultural experience | 0               | 2  | 11           | 13 | 5              | 6  | 38              | 30 | 3                  | 2 |

In terms of cultural awareness it seems that consumers with a higher level of education (college degree or higher) are more sensitive than those with a lower level of education. For instance, 74 percent of higher-educated respondents agreed that food consumption reflected cultural differences, compared

with 53 percent of lower-educated respondents who agreed with the statement. Moreover, 58 percent of the higher-educated agreed that the service provided at this particular restaurant reflected cultural values in Mexico compared with 43 percent of the lower-educated who agreed with the statement (Table 6).

**Table 6. Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness: Low Ed. (n=53) Vs. Hi. Ed. (n=57)**

| Question Contents   | <u>S. Agree</u> |    | <u>Agree</u> |    | <u>Neutral</u> |    | <u>Disagree</u> |    | <u>S. Disagree</u> |   |
|---|-----------------|----|--------------|----|----------------|----|-----------------|----|--------------------|---|
|   | L               | H  | L            | H  | L              | H  | L               | H  | L                  | H |
| Food reflects cultural differences                            | 4               | 9  | 24           | 33 | 16             | 10 | 9               | 5  | 0                  | 0 |
| American food culture influenced by Mexican food culture      | 0               | 3  | 8            | 15 | 15             | 13 | 21              | 24 | 9                  | 2 |
| The staff provides good service                               | 15              | 22 | 35           | 31 | 0              | 4  | 3               | 0  | 0                  | 0 |
| Prices are reasonable   | 13              | 24 | 36           | 32 | 4              | 1  | 0               | 0  | 0                  | 0 |
| Service provided reflects Mexican cultural values             | 2               | 14 | 21           | 19 | 15             | 13 | 14              | 12 | 0                  | 0 |
| Food provided is authentic Mexican food                       | 3               | 11 | 19           | 14 | 26             | 23 | 5               | 8  | 0                  | 1 |
| Visiting not for food but for the Mexican cultural experience | 0               | 5  | 15           | 8  | 12             | 9  | 20              | 33 | 6                  | 2 |

Some interesting data was revealed when studying the cultural awareness of surveyed consumers in terms of whether or not they would consider having a social gathering at the restaurant. Ninety-nine percent of the “No” respondents agreed that the staff provided good service, compared to 96 percent of “Yes” respondents; 99 percent of “No” respondents claimed that the prices were reasonable, compared to 87 percent of “Yes” respondents; 42 percent of “No” respondents agreed that the food is authentic Mexican food, but only 29 percent of “Yes” respondents claimed so (Table 7). It is interesting to note that the majority of “No” respondents liked this restaurant and agreed to the above statements; however, they would not consider having a social gathering there. Further investigation is done through interviews later in the study.

Ethnicity was also evaluated for belief differences. Except for the white/Caucasian respondents, the ethnic consumers surveyed include five African-Americans, two Asians, and four Hispanics. It seems that the African American consumers and Asian consumers agree that the food is authentic Mexican food, but the Caucasian and Hispanic groups varied in opinion. Most of them, according to interviews, felt that the food was “Americanized,” meaning that the food was mostly authentic but with some American flair. This indicates that the restaurant provides Mexican dishes but prepares them to fit a typically American demand. For instance, spicy dishes are common in Mexican food culture but are toned down because southern Americans are not accustomed to spicy foods.



**Table 7. Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness: For Parties Yes (n=45) Vs. No (n=65)**

| Question Contents   | <u>S. Agree</u> |    | <u>Agree</u> |    | <u>Neutral</u> |    | <u>Disagree</u> |    | <u>S.Disagree</u> |    |
|---|-----------------|----|--------------|----|----------------|----|-----------------|----|-------------------|----|
|   | Y               | N  | Y            | N  | Y              | N  | Y               | N  | Y                 | N  |
| Food reflects cultural differences                            | 4               | 8  | 37           | 19 | 1              | 24 | 3               | 14 | 0                 | 0  |
| American food culture influenced by Mexican food culture      | 0               | 1  | 15           | 10 | 10             | 24 | 18              | 29 | 2                 | 1  |
| The staff provides good service                               | 20              | 15 | 23           | 49 | 2              | 1  | 0               | 0  | 0                 | 0  |
| Price are reasonable  | 17              | 23 | 22           | 41 | 4              | 1  | 2               | 0  | 0                 | 0  |
| Service provided reflects Mexican cultural values             | 0               | 3  | 17           | 24 | 16             | 18 | 12              | 20 | 0                 | 0  |
| Food provided is authentic Mexican food                       | 2               | 6  | 11           | 21 | 24             | 23 | 8               | 12 | 0                 | 3  |
| Visiting not for food but for the Mexican cultural experience | 5               | 0  | 13           | 4  | 7              | 14 | 20              | 37 | 0                 | 10 |

Food consumption habits, such as what type of food to eat, where, and with whom to eat, are all culturally related. This is particularly true when food is consumed that is ethnically different from one's culture. In this case, we found that a majority of consumers agreed that food consumption is a reflection of culture, which indicated that southern Americans recognize the differences in the Mexican restaurant compared with American restaurants. The data collected through the questionnaire survey and open-ended interviews indicated that most consumers of Mexican food are somewhat knowledgeable about Mexican culture. When asked, "What are three things that make this restaurant different from American restaurants?" the typical answers are Spanish music, salsa and chips, food portions, and festive atmosphere.

When asked, "What are three things you like most and three things you dislike most about this Mexican restaurant?" most answers pointed to service, food, location, and features that are typical of both American and ethnic restaurants, such as happy hour, traffic, and cleanliness. This indicates that either ethnic restaurants influence American food culture or perhaps American food culture influences ethnic restaurants in certain regions and that they have become "Americanized." As stated previously, Mexican cuisine is a product of an intermingling of other food cultures. Mexican food itself uses spices and chilies, and because southern American food culture is typically bland, restaurants in the region tend to tone down the spiciness. Hence, ethnic restaurants tend to become Americanized (Tables 8 and 9).

**Table 8. Interviewed Responses: Males Vs. Females**

| Issues   | <u>Male</u>                      |   | <u>Female</u>               |   |
|--|----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
|  | Typical Answers                  | F | Typical Answers             | F |
| Please tell three things that you think make this restaurant different from a typical American restaurant. | Serves Mexican food only         | 9 | Slim wine selection         | 6 |
|  | Festive atmosphere               | 9 | Spanish speaking staff      | 5 |
|  | Serves salsa and chips           | 6 | Much more noise             | 4 |
|  | Spanish speaking staff           | 5 | Spanish music               | 4 |
|  | Spanish music                    | 4 | Festive atmosphere          | 3 |
| What are three things that attract your attention to this restaurant?                                      |                                  |   | Good food opportunity       | 2 |
|  | Choice of sitting inside/outside | 8 | Near the mall/good location | 4 |
|  | Near the mall/good location      | 7 | Colorful décor              | 3 |
|  | Good food portions               | 5 | Good price                  | 2 |
|  | Music perks you up               | 5 | Perfect for meeting         | 2 |
|  | Bright sign at entrance          | 5 |                             |   |
|  | Colorful décor                   | 4 |                             |   |
| Good price   | 4                                |   |                             |   |

Table 9 shows interview responses and separates them by gender to show response differences between male and female consumers. Selected questions were drawn from the interview to show the differences

between American and ethnic restaurants as well as the consumers' likes and dislikes about this particular ethnic restaurant.

**Table 9. Interviewed Responses: Likes and Dislikes (Males Vs. Females)**

| Issues   | <u>Male</u>                    |   | <u>Female</u>               |   |
|--|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
|  | Typical Answers                | F | Typical Answers             | F |
| What are three things that you like most about this restaurant?    | Happy hour                     | 8 | Happy hour                  | 5 |
|  | Festival atmosphere            | 7 | Food and service            | 5 |
|  | Comfortable taking small kids  | 7 | Cleanliness                 | 4 |
|  | Food and service               | 6 | Large bar drink             | 4 |
|  | Fresh made salsa and tortillas | 6 | Spanish music               | 2 |
|  | Hospitality                    | 6 |                             |   |
|  | Music                          | 5 |                             |   |
|  | Cantina décor                  | 4 |                             |   |
|  | Cleanliness                    | 4 |                             |   |
|  | Large bar drink                | 2 |                             |   |
|  | Fresh-squeezed lemonade        | 2 |                             |   |
| What are three things that you dislike most about this restaurant? | Long wait on weekend-dinner    | 7 | Music too loud at times     | 5 |
|  | Music too loud at times        | 6 | Service not always the best | 3 |
|  | Heavy traffic                  | 4 | Long wait on weekend-dinner | 3 |
|  | Small portion of sour cream    | 3 | Heavy traffic               | 3 |
|  | Service not always the best    | 3 | Waiting area is too small   | 2 |
|  | Too spicy food                 | 2 |                             |   |
|  | Tables at bar not comfortable  | 2 |                             |   |
|  | Language barrier               | 1 |                             |   |

In the above discussion the authors examined factors involved in day-to-day decisions consumers make related to purchase, as it is these factors that decide when, how, why, and where people buy items. Other examined issues include how these factors relate to marketing and how to manipulate people's decisions of what to buy. Food preparation, presentation, and preference offer insight into one's culture and provide marketers with valuable information about culture and how it relates to consumer behavior.

The anthropological approach to the study of consumer behavior is significant here because it allows for direct observation of people and their decision-making and explains why they make the choices they do (Tian 2000, 2001b). A future study could encompass the multiple factors related to consumer behavior or include more factors in an anthropological approach, such as that developed by Tian (2001a) in his study of an ethnic Chinese restaurant, to evaluate consumers' cultural awareness. It was found that in this Don Pablo's consumers have accepted the diverse culture and want to be further educated about it. Cultural diversity is present in southern America and seems to be well-accepted. Persons of various ethnic groups such as Asians, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Caucasians were observed eating at Don Pablo's. All seemed comfortable and somewhat knowledgeable about Mexican food and culture.

### Conclusion

Consumers are the most important factor in the restaurant industry; they take on the role of decision-makers for the consumption of food and the service provided by restaurants and determine the success or failure of a particular restaurant. This study deals with one restaurant in a region of the southern United States that is conducive to the acceptance of ethnic food culture and culturally diverse establishments. Most of the consumers at this restaurant were satisfied with the cultural experience as well as the service. However, cases were observed where some customers noticed the inconvenient amount of time it took the waitstaff to collect the bill. This was mainly a problem during weekday lunch hours where the restaurant was extremely busy and consumers were in a hurry to get back to work. Most ethnic cultures see mealtime as a time to socialize and relax. The waitstaff is careful not to interrupt consumers more than is necessary because of this. However, as observed by Tian (2001), sometimes the consumers do need the waitstaff to interact with them more often, especially during weekday lunch. As the interview data suggests, language barriers can negatively influence consumers and should be addressed by the management.

As discussed, the consumers at an ethnic restaurant may not need to be well-educated to be aware of ethnic food and cultural differences. However, the data

collected for this case study indicated that Caucasians were the most populous consumers at this particular restaurant; they went mainly for the food but also for the ethnic cultural experience, at least to certain degrees. This suggests some meaningful implications for owners and managers of ethnic restaurants. Managers may want to pay more attention to educating consumers about the cultural meaning of ethnic food. Customers were observed asking servers what certain things on the menus were and what ingredients were in them. Managers could include a description of foods common to the Mexican culture but which are not understood by southern Americans. This would increase consumer understanding of Mexican food and educate them about the culture. Management might also hire more Spanish-speaking servers or hostesses to increase the cultural values of the restaurant.

This particular Don Pablo's hosts a *Cinco de Mayo* celebration to commemorate Mexico's independence. This is a good way to increase cultural awareness among consumers; perhaps the managers could look into other cultural celebrations to increase consumer turnout and educational opportunities about Mexican cultural values. A correlation between education and cultural awareness leading toward acceptance is a concept that the restaurant should acknowledge and actively participate in. Benefits would include a furthering of the image consumers have toward the food culture and advancing a positive understanding for ethnically diverse people. This would benefit not only the restaurant but the community and the nation in terms of cultural integrations.

As previous studies have demonstrated, the influence of cultural awareness on consumer behavior is difficult to verify without the use of several data collecting methods (Bailey and Tian 2002; Tian 2001; Witte and Tian 2003). In this case study the data collected through observations, questionnaire-surveys, and interviews provides information necessary to understand southern American consumers' cultural awareness. The experience of participant observation within the restaurant is particularly useful in studying consumer behavior and providing managerial recommendations. Even so, it is easy to see the limitation of data collection and the time constraints of the research in further analysis. More observations are definitely needed to conduct detailed analyses and interviews with the service and managerial staff to better understand consumer behaviors at such an ethnic restaurant.

## Notes

1. Jennifer DeJesus is an undergraduate student at Erskine College, South Carolina.
2. Robert Guang Tian is a Professor of Business Administration at Coker College, South Carolina. This study was financially supported by an Erskine College research grant.

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**Appendix A: Survey For Mexican Restaurants and Service**

1) How much do you agree with this statement: "Food consumption reflects cultural differences"?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

2) How knowledgeable are you about Mexican food and Mexican Culture?

Very Knowledgeable\_\_ Somewhat Knowledgeable\_\_ No Opinion\_\_ Not Knowledgeable\_\_

3) How much do you agree with this statement: "American food culture is greatly influenced by Mexican food culture"?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

**Please answer the following questions based on your experience at Don Pablo's:**

4) Do you agree that the staff provides good service?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

5) Do you agree that the prices are reasonable at this restaurant?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

6) How much do you agree with this statement: "The service provided by the staff in this restaurant reflects cultural values in Mexico"?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

7) How much do you agree with this statement: "The food provided at this restaurant is authentic Mexican food"?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

8) Would you consider having a birthday party or social gathering here?

Yes\_\_ No\_\_

9) How much do you agree with this statement: "I visit this restaurant not only for the food but for the cultural experience"?

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Not sure      Agree      Strongly Agree

10) How many time a week do you eat Mexican Food?

1\_\_ 2\_\_ 3\_\_ 4\_\_ 5 or more\_\_

11) Please tell me your gender: Male\_\_ Female\_\_

12) Please tell me your ethnic background:

a-African American      d-Chinese  
b-Asian-      e-Other  
c-White/Caucasian

13) Please indicate your age:

<19\_\_ 20-35\_\_ 36-45\_\_ 46-64\_\_ >65\_\_

14) Please indicate your level of education:

High School Grad\_\_ College Grad\_\_ Post-Graduate Degree\_\_

15) Please indicate your occupation\_\_\_\_\_

16) Do you generally eat Mexican Food for:

Lunch\_\_\_\_ Dinner\_\_\_\_

17) Do you generally go:

Yourself\_\_\_\_ With family\_\_\_\_ With a date/spouse\_\_\_\_ With friends/colleagues\_\_\_\_ Other\_\_\_\_\_

18) Religious Preference\_\_\_\_\_

19) Are you a Smoker or Non-Smoker (please circle one)

Thank you for you cooperation and patience in filling out this survey. May I please have your name and phone number for a follow up study if you do not mind?

Name:\_\_\_\_\_ Number:( )\_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1) Can you please tell me three things that you think make this restaurant different from a typical American restaurant?

2) What are three things that you will not do at this restaurant but you may do at a typical American restaurant?

3) What are three things you like most about this restaurant?

4) What are three things you dislike most about this restaurant?

5) Assume I am your friend, how will you describe this restaurant to me to draw my interest to this restaurant?

6) What was it about this restaurant that attracts your attention?

7) Would you consider having a party or social gathering at this restaurant? If yes, why?

8) Do you believe this restaurant reflects Mexican culture? Why?