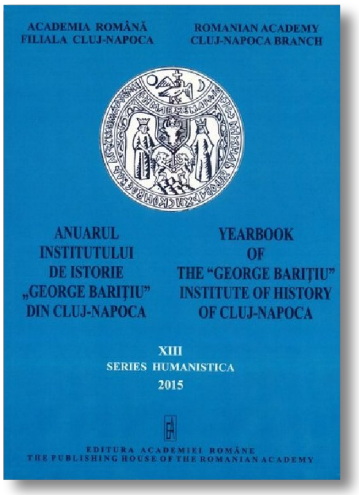

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STUDII

SOCIOLOGIE ŞI ANTROPOLOGIE

EATING OUT: (RE)SEARCHING THE LABS OF SOCIA(BI)LITY

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Abstract. *At the crossroads between the private and the public realm, the communist/capitalist nomenklatura, directors and secretaries, families and friends, students, lovers etc., they all share (have and will do) for a while common places, the restaurants – the space within which people may question the daily reality, or reshape future-to-be public/private actions. Being mingled spots for those that may have social action capabilities, the restaurants offer a space of fusion between what is old and new in cultural and national terms, the interconnection of food/music with generative dialogues, the contexts for a range of emotional and/or strategical developments. Chefs, social scientists, designers, musicians, or other socio-economic groups may see and perceive quite differently the quintessence of a restaurant. One of the best places for getting in touch with the experience(s) of such settings is our capital city, particularly its old city centre, involved in an urban regeneration process within which the "pubs and clubs" phenomenon is unstoppable. Here I present some case studies from my fieldwork in Bucharest, done in the spring of 2012.*

Keywords: *Bucharest's old city centre, eating out, restaurateurs, diners, clues, gastronomy, slow food, circular process, post-communism, public realm.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The so much intentionally neglected by the communist regime downtown of Bucharest (and through carelessness or a mixture of personal interests by the post-communist one), the reminiscence of the old centre of the Romanian capital city, has reached its closing stage. A long time postponed involvement for reshaping the area had increased the voices of those who claimed for the preservation of its old (inter-war?) attractiveness, hand-in-hand with the erasure of its unsightliness and the agony suppression of a decaying space. In the last years, their calls were heard by a number of private investors and long after them by the local authorities that, instead of making an action plan, were concerned to legalize post-factum the damages that had been done. In fine-tuning with the global route of money, images, goods and desires (Liechty, 2005), and on behalf of the *welfare* through development, the *warfare* like

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interventions upon the former built environment wiped out the local history of the place, and made it ready to deliver "bread and circuses" on daily basis.

Currently, all those who, for the very first time, step into the old city centre of Bucharest, will have quite huge difficulties to figure out where on earth is "the old"? Do not worry, if you have a well-trained eye in the filed of architecture, history, and arts, you may find some small fragments of the past beauties, hidden behind sports bars, nightclubs, fast-food sites, rave, techno and other noisy places. For the rest of us, the message is quite obvious: you are in the right spot, here all your needs and desires will be fulfilled, it makes no sense to resist, let yourself penetrated down to the bones by these awesome products of the consumption society, embrace them without rest and carry on with you (into your networks, your life and soul) this (new) space of similitude (Sam, 2012) and solitary contractuality (Augé, 1995).

Eating and drinking outside the domestic space, especially for urban residents of the big cities, has become a common praxis. Involving a mixture of short and long episodes (Jordan, 2007), either during the weekend or in the working days, and almost regardless of the hour, the pleasure and the frenzy of dining in the city, have spread at all layers of the population. This sign of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), not so long ago the feature of a wealthy minority, is now available for masses, with some constrictions for lower social classes that are still poorly represented. *Being seen* and seeing the others hanging out has become highly important. A critical eye will argue that in the 1900s, when Bucharest was overwhelmed by bohemian life, and even after that, in the '50s-'60s, when we had just started the new era of socialism, people used to enjoy the urban life in similar ways. Yes, people gathered then too around bottles with hard/soft drinks (and not so much food at the table), but they did it primarily for the need of communication, of a long discussion about the world, arts, ideas, about freedom and emancipation, for sharing knowledge with the peers, and not firstly because they want to show that they have enough money to pay the beverages – the quintessence of the today's voyeurism.

As some artists, writers, or actors have testified (Boicea & Anghelescu, 2008), the bohemian life of the past years, one *embedded in relationships*, doesn't exist anymore. That past-behavior – bachique-anarchique-libertine form of social(bi)lity – is saying less and less for more and more people. We need more and more money, they said, in order to live like normal human being, and that keeps us running after them almost all the time. Consequently, it seems that the groups of friends were replaced by the groups of interests, and the feeling of being together (without precisely knowing why), by accurate goals and needs that must be fulfilled on behalf of personal (and not mutual) achievements. *Embedded in wages*, the bohemian life of these days has a different configuration: it is the outcome of fragile and dispersed relationships, and of the vanishing exchange of ideas as give-and-take tool of mind opening and emancipation. These redefines the sense of belongingness (Gieryn, 2000), and crumbles the safety and familiarity endowed by our (ex-)small circle of intimates, with whom we used to share a glass of wine at

somebody's home. The results are pretty much perceivable: the public realm is our new shelter[1] and its appropriation (*i.e.*, the domestication and the individualization of the public place, Kumar & Makarova, 2008) is the actual stake.

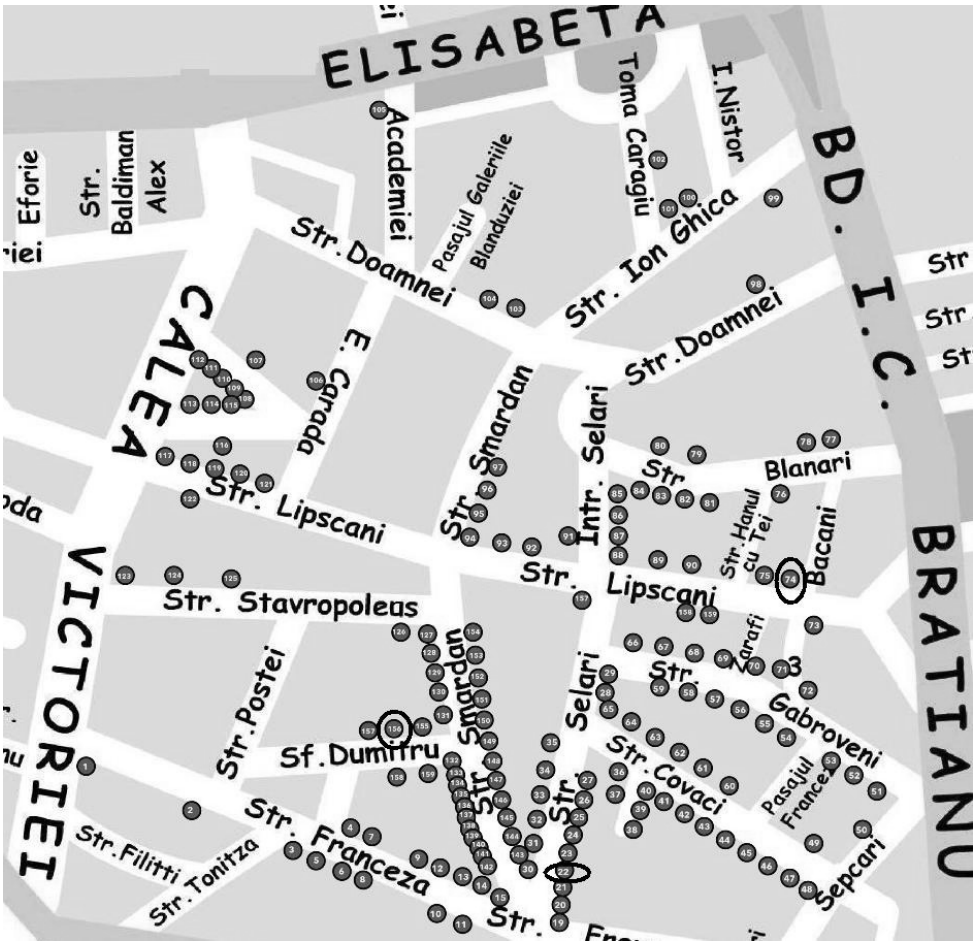

Figure 1. Conquering the public realm of downtown Bucharest (*source:* Vârlan, 2012).

2. LABS OF SOCIA(BI)LITY

In these stages of (trans)national dissolutions and worldwide recompositions, from ordinary people to mass-media, political establishments, the corporatist sector,

[1] Mapping the pubs, bars, the restaurants and other entertaining places of the Old Town of Bucharest, Corina Vârlan found in May, 2012, about 160 spots that, according to her investigations, are visited daily by 300,000 people.

the banks, claim and cry after the need to rediscover a sense of community and togetherness. I doubt that it will have the same strength as the one emphasized by the classical sociology and/or anthropology, and I am sure that it cannot be built up overnight since it was deliberately crushed by those who now are looking after it. My guess is that for the time being, we should be happy if we can grasp some kind of *ephemeral solidarity*, which does not last, and is not automatically constructed with your peers. If you let the sociological imagination to work creatively, you could find oases of this kind almost everywhere, either in real, or in artificial places: from buses, restaurants, airports, parks, you name it, to the plentiful variations of virtual communities.

Investigating the labs of socia(bi)lity means looking after the semi-public/ private containers/vehicles/locations, researching short-termism, temporary, momentary, transitory, transient, evanescent relations, and, in due course, dealing with explicit lifeworlds (Schutz, 1967). The scenery of restaurants was appealing for me, because as other researchers pointed out, within these sites for social identity (Carroll & Torfason, 2011), you can *see* the table-based sociability (Spang, 2000) in action. The second reason was that inside the restaurant is possible to *figure out*, more easily, how much remains local from the socio-cultural domain, and how much has entered in the era of trans-localism[2]. There you can see, smell, feel, taste the basic culturally meaningful items (*i.e.*, the food and the drinks). Thirdly, my choice was guided by the fact that the interior of the restaurant is the best place where "the tense combination of private consumption and conspicuous personal display" (Spary, 2000, 1) is *visible* for the researcher.

Needless to say that the results of these directions of investigation are indebted to the sharp eyes of the observer, whoever s/he may be: stakeholder, key informant, visitor or researcher, and whatever are her/his capability to comprehend, analyze, and describe what is happening under her/his gaze. As I emphasized elsewhere, one way to domesticate our experiential views of consumption (Addis & Holbrook, 2001), our subjectivities, and convert them into a digestible objective/academic inter-subjectivity, is to employ (if possible) at least two pairs of different lens (Totelecan, 2014). Following that idea, in this article, my third piece of writings about the old city centre of Bucharest[3] –

[2] "A full analysis of the ways in which the restaurant, as institution, has been globalised, even while cookery, as cuisine, has been localized, would be an enormous, necessarily collaborative, project, but one well worth pursuing" (Spang, 2009).

[3] The first one was about the Lebenswelt of the area, about the hybridization processes and their macro-influences (Totelecan, 2013), and the second one about the micro-level inputs of the people who enter into the old city centre of Bucharest's setting (Totelecan, 2014). In many ways, these papers, as much as this one, are variations of my encounter in the capital city of Romania, in the third and the forth week of April 26th, 2012, with my friend and colleague the Berliner social geographer Prof. Dr. Hans-Joachim Bürkner (Institute for Geography of Potsdam University and Leibniz-Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning, Erkner/Berlin), and of our spontaneous decision to build up a research project about the redevelopment of Bucharest's inner city/old town centre.

my middle-earth[4] story of the triptych – the voices of the restaurant insiders (owners & managers)[5] will be counterbalance by outsiders' voices, by the opinions of the diners, recorded by *restograf.ro*[6], who usually have at least one meal in the examined restaurant.

A survey based questionnaire[7] is commonly applied in this field of research. However, being closer to the qualitative side of social sciences, for the evaluation of the restaurant experiences I will examine the combined effects of the behavior of restaurants' employees, and of the environment where they perform the service; I will come across to what the scientific literature called *the clues of the diners*.

> *"Dining in a table-service restaurant is a multilayered experience that involves at least three types of clues. Although food quality is basic, the ambience and service performance greatly influence a customer's evaluation of a particular establishment. Diners use the following types of clues to judge a restaurant experience: functional — the technical quality of the food and service; mechanic — the ambience and other design and technical elements; and humanic — the performance, behavior, and appearance of the employees" (Wall & Berry, 2007, p. 59, the abstract).*

The food itself and the accuracy or efficiency of the service (*functional clues*), the design and the ambient/atmospheric factors (*mechanic clues*), the behavior of

[4] I borrowed the metaphor of the fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien to emphasize that the world of restaurants – the topic of this paper, is under two kinds of pressures: the above world of hybridization, and the below one, of the individual consumer who struggles for her/his individuation.

[5] From April 22nd to 26th, 2012, we did semi-structured interviews with ten owners and/or managers of restaurants, pubs, and bars, all active in the old city centre of Bucharest. Here I will use three exemplary cases with representatives of *La mama* [*At Mom's*, top restaurant with generalist cuisine, but Romanian dominance, 1 Băcani Str., (corner with Lipscani Str.), figure 1, no. 74], *Crama Domnească* [*The Royal Wine Cellar*, top restaurant with Romanian cuisine, 13–15 Şelari Str., figure 1, no. 22], and *Malagamba* (top/medium restaurant with generalist cuisine but Italian dominance, 2 Sf. Dumitru Str., figure 1, no. 156). Supplementary, I will use other interviews available on the internet with them.

[6] The website restograf.ro is a web platform that provides insides in the gastronomy of Bucharest, focusing on social interactions around gastronomic events. The idea of a "monography" about local restaurants, which contains evaluations on the spot, consumers opinions, articles, news, polls etc., was setup by a group of reflection interested in cooking not only as an individual act, hedonist, but in all its dimensions: social, (inter)cultural, scientific, and – as they say – if the opportunity will arise, even political.

[7] It seems that the Holly Grail of the quantitative researches focusing on service industries is shared by the SERVQUAL model with five service dimensions, comprising a set of 22 items for expectation and perception: "tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel), reliability (ability to perform the proposed service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence), and empathy (the individualized attention and care that the service provider gives to customers)" (Parasuraman et al., 1988, quoted by Chow Lau, Lo, Sha & Yun, 2007, p. 700–701), and the decision- and experiential-oriented perspectives designed by Holbrook (1995).

service employees, including their level of enthusiasm (*humanic clues*), are discussed by scholars such as Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel (2002, quoted by Wall & Berry, 2007). It was mentioned that for a more complete picture of the restaurant service experience, a multilayered experience, is worth to pursue the interaction between these types of clues.

One should be aware that the weight of these clues in the social imaginary is fluctuating, and, as a general rule, or typically, what you got on the table will have an impact over your perception about the setting where that table is, and regarding the waiters that brings you the food. Of course, the exceptions tend to be rules by themselves: those who are looking, in the first instance, after mechanic clues will tend to be less judgmental when the average quality food arrives, and also be rather indulgent with the people who supply the meals. Not lastly, the servicescape ("squeezed" between Appadurai's, 1996, five dimensions of global cultural flow: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes), if it gets good marks in customers' perceptions, and evaluations of service quality, is able to moderate between the effects of mechanic and functional clues.

3. RESTAURATEURS' STORIES

Looking back at the restaurants' life during the communist time, George Butunoiu (2010, 2011) has sketched the atmosphere of the recent past by presenting a small amount of successful stories of locations such as: Select, Capşa, Golden Apple (in Romanian, *Mărul de Aur*), Two Roosters (*Doi cocoşi*), The Pearl (*Perla*), Beer Dipper (*Caru cu bere*) that, according to him, were able to survive after the transition period. Their long histories have had many ups and downs, linked to the periods of relaxation (the 70s) or agony (the 90s) of the past regime. Anyone could go in these famous restaurants, though not so many, apart from the communist nomenklatura, dared; without being "closed network" restaurants, they kept ordinary people away[8]. Eating in these places was almost the same as saying that you are very well seen by the Communist Party, if not a full-blown nomenclature member.

Although most of those restaurants have changed their ownership after the '89 Revolution, and became capitalist restaurants (*i.e.*, the private owners replaced the socialist state restaurateurs), not all of them had the same luck. The survivors are relaying on the *curiosity* of those who did not experience that kind of restaurants, and also on the *nostalgia* of those who were familiar with them; their (capitalist) restaurateurs try to regain both categories of people. The motto under

[8] The students, the emancipated inhabitants of Bucharest, etc., had their own restaurants, acknowledged and labeled as such, but they were below these "high luxury" restaurants, with more than ten dishes in the menu.

which the restaurateurs work is that sooner or later all of them will come to see how these places have evolved in the meantime.

> *I returned at Select after more than 20 years, ready to face this "communist monster" that has survived until today only because loyal customers ... all sorts of present and former "tenants" of the governmental building, which is across the street. I was terribly excited to revisit the large soup bowls on the tables, and to meet the lady waitress at the age of 50+ absolutely adorable, smiling and jaunty. The manager confirmed that all the staff, from the waiter to the chef, is "inherited" from Ceausescu's time, now more than 25 years ago. […] Although I have not found yet at Select any dish for which I want to return or to invite someone in particular, I will return because of nostalgia, for the reason that I imagine an old chef with passion for his job and for a well done work […] and for the venerable ladies waitresses, for the soup bowls with ladle, and because the owner is always there, among customers. That is rather for a social and emotional experience than for the gastronomic one, and, to be a little selfish, I do not ever want to change it* (Butunoiu, 2010, my translation from Romanian).

This odd combination between the curiosity of the newcomers, and the nostalgia of the old-timers helps settings like Select to stay away of the Italian, French, Chinese, Arabic, Japanese gastronomy, of fusion cuisine, or whatever is in these days fashionable[9]. Since they do a good business from that, they do not mind to offer *the crème de la crème* of the communist gastronomy, the peak of the socialist cuisine (*e.g.*, stroganoff, soup with dumplings, consommé, scrambled salmon, some seafood – much appreciated by the communist gourmets), and even to stay away of the traditional Romanian gastronomy.

On the restaurant market, having a *clear and consistent concept* of your business makes the difference between successful restaurants (Parsa *et al.*, 2005, quoted by Wall & Berry, 2007), and average dining places. The development of a business concept can be a multilayer enterprise that range from the initial idea that will be implemented, to a learning-by-doing endeavor – as it is probably the above case of the restaurant Select. Henceforward, I will look at the *developmental concepts* of three restaurateurs, embedded in the food they deliver, the service offered by them, and the atmosphere/the ambiance that they provide, as they were settled by the managements of: *At Mom*[10] (owned by Catalin Mahu), *The Royal Wine Cellar*[11] (owned by Pepe Berciu & Ion Biris), and *Malagamba*[12] (owned by John McCarthy), our case studies for this article.

[9] Looking at customers' requirements connected to organic food, and at the owner-managers claimed to be advocates of it, Revell & Blackburn (2007) have emphasized that there are limited demands for expensive organic menu options, especially when high quality non-organic ingredients are available.

[10] The restaurant's website: http://www.lamama.ro/index.php?lang=en.

[11] The restaurant's website, in Romanian: http://cramadomneasca.net/.

[12] The restaurant's website: http://malagamba.ro/home/.

Figure 2. The logos of the case studies: *At Mom's*, *The Royal Wine Cellar*, and *Malagamba*.

3.1. AT MOM'S

In 13.05.2011, in an interview for "Food & Bar"[13], Cătălin Mahu, the owner of Trotter Restaurant co. (*i.e.*, *At Mom's* restaurants, Cafepedia cafes, and the pub Charlatans)[14] said that even if we are passing the crisis, the development of the brand is still a priority. For the 12th anniversary of the restaurants chain, 16th in 2015, he got a new opening in the Lipscani area, on Băcani Str. His 160,000 € investment reshaped the former Dika clothing store and reconverted it into a 165 seats restaurant (90 inside and 75 on the terrace) with an exquisite wine library, a cozy bar when you can also eat, and a special area with sofas for relaxation. One year later, in 22.04.2012, jointly with my friend Hans-Joachim Bürkner, we had the chance to do one hour long in-depth interview with the manager of the new location.

Perhaps, due to the economic-financial crisis, the peripheral areas of Bucharest have faced a decreasing interest of the developers, and a lot of investors have moved into the city center. Seeing the old city centre of Bucharest as the new business space, an area in a constant progress and quickly able to increase the profit, the investors (foreigners or Romanians, not necessarily from the capital city), and at the same time *the commodifiers of the neighborhood*, came with money, bought buildings around, renovated them, opened interesting locations, and established various small core development businesses. The things evolved around some poles/nuclei (*e.g.*, streets like Lipscani, Franceză, or Şelari) that, in time, interconnected each other, and ended up as nodes of a network of services. Consequently, the neighborhood became the core developmental area of the city, probably the fastest developing area of Bucharest for the restaurant-type of businesses.

The successful Romanian brand *At Mom* was born from the desire of *being able to eat in the city like at mom's home*; it is the outcome of a business that started in 1999, in Bucharest, with the first opening (on Barbu Văcărescu Str.) of a restaurant called *At Mom's*. In the following years, a chain of restaurants (8 restaurants plus 3 coffee bars and 1 pub) was developed in an *organic manner*

[13] For details, in Romanian, see: http://tinyurl.com/q8opmtg.

[14] The owner of the whole chain is from Onesti. He came in Bucharest for his education, and after that he decided to stay there for long. He has developed a few small businesses, and then has limited them, and has concentrated all the investment in the restaurant and pub sectors.

(*CS1, 8m6s*)[15], and its own franchise, targeting cities with more than 250,000 inhabitants, was launched (in 2008). The sole Romanian shareholder has initiated and developed the business with his money, without taking any credits, and by using a *step-by-step development* method, which implies that parts of the profit from other places are invested in the new ones.

Over the time, the *At Mom's* group has had ups and downs. While in other central areas of Bucharest the business has rather stagnated, in the old city centre, with a still ongoing a booming development, the possibilities of future businesses are still high, and that is why "we might think that a new pub in the area could be a new investment for us" (*CS1, 32m33s*). It is interesting to notice that their development is not done by default: it has always in the upstream two or three years close onsite observations of the neighborhood, in order to see what kind of people are moving around, and what kind of desires they might have. Targeting a clientele of people above 20 years of age, with average to high income, they were able to stay on the market by assuming high international standards of quality, keeping and providing a successful combination of traditionally recipes (*i.e.*, "food closer to that made at home"), and a few international cuisine specialties.

Figure 3. The interior of *At Mom's* restaurant (*source:* http://tinyurl.com/nw25lel).

3.2. THE ROYAL WINE CELLAR

Located near the historical castle – you can actually see the excavations through the dining room windows, and oriented towards tourists, *The Royal Wine Cellar* Romanian restaurant was established (*reopened*)[16] in 2008. Knowing that

[15] Quotation from the case study one (CS1) interview, recorded at 8 minutes and 10 seconds after its beginning (8m6s).

[16] The very first opening was in 1971, and at that time the location was part of the castle. The following remarks were taken from the interview with George Dumitrescu, the marketing director of The Royal Wine Cellar (done in 25.04.2012), and used here as components of the case study number two (CS2).

can be a risky business to place the assets in a rented building, the restaurateur did the necessarily investments for the renovation of the venue (*CS2, 14m50s*). They strongly believed that for a flourishing business you must offer something supplementary in relation to the businesses around. Given that the neighborhood was overwhelmed by establishments with the Italian style *trattoria* or French style *bistro*, it was handy for them to skip the *fast casual & casual dining* types of restaurants, and concentrate on *fine dining*.

> *You have to impress customers to come in this area, and spend their money here. We knew that there were only five spots in Bucharest that had Romanian cuisine. We were sure that will be a good idea to open here, in this place; the historical centre would be the right place. […] Years ago it was difficult to get clients, they asked me: can I come up here? Is it safe? Is there a place for parking? It was a kind of mistrust, but it changed to the good* (CS2, 22m5s).

The Royal Wine Cellar is a business with only one location (40 workers employed, many part-time), functioning in a place embedded with history, which cannot be found in another part of Bucharest. Thanks to this strategic advantage, the restaurant has two flows of clients: the local inhabitants (natives and/or newcomers in the capital city), and the tourists (Romanians and/or foreigners). It has had the chance to catch two rabbits at the same time: 1) *the (local) fashionistas*, by delivering them the flavors of authenticity and traditionally style cuisine, and 2) *the (global) wanderers*, by wrapping up, and sell them the royal-kind/blue-blood atmosphere of the long-gone "Little Paris"[17]. As George Dumitrescu has emphasized, "our clients want hospitality, more than only food and drink", "the young people come for the atmosphere, for talking together" (*CS2, 11m20s*), and those "in their forties want to know more about the place and to talk with the employees" (*CS2, 13m50s*).

Sharing the common features granted by the ritual of eating out, this time *eating royally* in a fancy restaurant that affords different sorts of experiences than *eating familially*, both crowds – *the localists* and *the globalists* – are not substantially dissimilar. At least this is what some of the members of the consumer culture theory camp claim when advice us that outmoded center–periphery, producer–consumer, researcher–researched, and other kind of hegemonies must be transcended, and the sociologically impoverished mode of analysis focusing on symbolic distinctions rejected, if we want to produce legitimate knowledge and theory (Thompson, Arnould & Giesler, 2013). Maybe, nowadays, when the lines between *emic* and *etic* are not just thin, but extremely blurry (if there are any!), it makes sense to look at the synergies instead of tensions, and what should be done at the level of the daily life realities, as much as at the conceptual levels. Nevertheless, to get rid of the

[17] Bucharest's nickname for the period between the two World Wars, a point of reference in the history of the Romanian capital city when the elegant architecture and the sophisticate elite were not endangered.

professional jargon's ghosts is not an easy task, and "like previous efforts at institutional change, this diversified and decentralized project of social science reformation will likely continue to be a slow and arduous struggle against myriad forces of socio-cultural inertia and deeply entrenched orthodoxies" (Thompson, Arnould & Giesler, 2013, p. 18).

Figure 4. The interior of *The Royal Wine Cellar* restaurant (*source:* http://tinyurl.com/o2vcgxy).

Therefore, in the absence of something spectacular, and especially for keeping the shades of the phenomenon, I will harshly say that the dissimilarity between the local and the global consumer consists in their different positioning of consuming the servicescape: from within, as "insiders" or from without, as "outsiders". But as long as neither the average member of the first group of customers, nor that of the second one, are experts in local gastronomy, or highly specialized in interior designs, they will not be able to make an accurate distinction between the genuine aspects of the setting, and the counterfeits with which they are attracted in. (So yes, they are so similar in unawareness, though being dissimilar in knowledge!) Who needs that clear-cut demarcation between back-stage and front-stage, excepting a few odd researchers that might find the issue appealing? For the rest, not knowing, or at best, not paying attention at the thin line between authentic and kitsch is the ticket toward a stunning world, where one should stay as much as possible. *The Royal Wine Cellar* management team has well understood that, and finds the proper solution that makes the client to come back again, and again. They know that the secret of a successful

business is to invest in mechanic and humanic clues, to let the client become the master, and decides what s/he wants (*CS2, 22m55s*).

3.3. MALAGAMBA

Malagamba was opened in March 2010, in the old center of Bucharest, near the Comedy Theatre, where the Romanian jazz drummer Sergiu Malagamba used to perform in the '40s. The restaurant was in service in a location rented from the Administration of Property Funds, an institution of the City Hall. Due to the confrontation between the good intentions implied by the enterprise, a genuine entrepreneurial innovation (as we will see below), and the not so positive aims, or "bureaucratic abuses" of the authorities (as they were called by the restaurateur, in the interview taken in September, 9th, 2010 by Cristi Roman, or in January, 3rd, 2012 by Monica Bonea), the end of *Malagamba* setting came faster and earlier than was expected. Facing constant controls, and ongoing harassing, the owner of the place, the Irishman professional landscape architect John McCarthy, finally gave up. At the end of October 2013, after about four years of operation and several in-between struggles[18] with local administration, the restaurant was closed. On the road, the restaurateur found out that if you want to be successful in this business you have to have not only money and patience, but also nerves of steel.

His inspiration to open a restaurant in the capital city of Romania, came after a vacation in Bucharest, in 2007, when he "was amazed by the poor quality of restaurants' food and services"; he thought that there he will have the chance to fulfill his "dream of having a restaurant with excellent food and service, without deceiving customers […] to provide 5-star food at 3 star prices" (Roman, 2010, my translation from Romanian). After three years he decided to invest, and used the name of a past local jazzman as the brand of his restaurant. His business concept, the idea of "providing high quality food at moderate prices" (Bonea, 2012, my translation from Romanian), was pretty much on the slow food line of thinking[19], which says that at every level, our food supply must meet the three criteria of *quality*, *purity* and *justice* (Petrini, 2013). Blending the local history (by reemphasizing the Romanian trendsetter Sergiu Malagamba, an innovator that brought a new fashion in the music at that time, fresh ideas and concepts to Romania, and his

[18] The beginning of the end started one year ago when, after a routine check, the Financial Guard discovered the equivalent amount of 9 euros unregistered cash – the waiters' tips. Consequently, the restaurant management was fined with about 2,000 euros, forced to close for three months, and nearly 20 people lost their jobs.

[19] Founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986, Slow Food international movement has started as an alternative to fast-food. Preserving traditional/local/regional cuisine, encouraging farmers to plant seeds and have livestock specific for their ecosystem, the movement is visible in over 150 countries, and "has grown into a global movement involving millions of people, working to ensure everyone has access to good, clean and fair food" ("About us. Slow food is a global, grassroots organization", n.d.).

developments of Malagambism – the local version of cosmopolitanism at that time) with Italian cuisine, aromatic herbs, wine and drinks from remote places such as Chile or Spain, the Irishman John McCarthy put into practice a totally unusual concept of restaurant for Bucharest's landscape.

Figure 5. The interior of *Malagamba* restaurant (*source:* http://tinyurl.com/q9uyrl4).

> *Unfortunately, the restaurant market in Bucharest is still underdeveloped, especially at the level of services and the quality of food, and we are trying to raise that. Dublin, for example, although it is a much smaller city, has a much higher concentration of services and good restaurants. […] That is what we want, to come up with something new, to change certain habits, and to get out of the usual pattern regarding food and services. Although our cuisine has an Italian specificity, sometimes we are pushing the limits: for example, we have in the menu an Asian salad, very loved by customers, served warm, originated somewhere in the Far East. From time to time we add at the menu such special items* (Roman, 2010, my translation from Romanian).

Malagamba restaurant was a place of local cultural memory that pointed back to a vanished Romanian everyday culture back in the 1940s, where people were striving for getting a bite of the "Westernized" atmosphere/Lebenswelt. The fusion between old and new, both in cultural and national terms, the interconnection of good food/music with a well-designed place devoted to socia(bi)lity was, by far, one of the best *eating stylishly* combination. Avoiding the "Irish pub" concept, the restaurateur was interested in collecting the local flavors, of delivering fresh and exotic, and of keeping the eyes opens at what the customer needs.

> *Our customers are encouraged to give their opinion incognito, leaving a message in a sealed box that is treated confidentially. In this way I get to know their true opinions and complaints, and only I have the access at the messages. I find out about complaints in this way, and I make sure that there are no messages "lost" on the road* (Roman, 2010, my translation from Romanian).

In this way, he was able to satisfy more demanding clients, especially those who traveled outside the country, who have a more developed sense of taste. The customers, as much as I could see doing participatory observation on the spot, seemed to enjoy it a lot. They loved the grilled lamb chops provided in raw form by the nearby local producer, or the homemade fresh pasta, not the dried kind, packaged and who knows how old – to mention only two of many dishes done in slow food manner. Regrettably, quality as the main objective: *buono, pulito, e giusto* – to quote the founder of the slow food movement, is hard to be kept, and it is even harder to make profit in such way, especially when the environment around you is populated by ready-made products of dubious origins that say "guaranteed maximum profit". If out there less than a few of restaurants are devoted to quality provision/eating stylishly, most probably the thin line between ready-made and freshness will not be crossed by so many restaurateurs.

4. THE VOICES OF THE DINERS

In this section I will look after the elements of the multilayered dining experience, *i.e.* the functional, mechanic and humanic clues. The dataset that I will use consists of the assessments made by the customers of the three case study restaurants, about 60 comments posted on *restograf.ro* in the dedicated pages of these restaurants, until September 22nd, 2014, when I did my last survey of the website. According to the website, *At Mom* restaurant had 3,496 viewers (2 comments); the readers rating (13 votes, from 1 – minimum to 10 – maximum) was: 6.23 points for "food", 6.45 for "atmosphere/ambiance", and 6.5 for "service"[20]. *The Royal Wine Cellar* restaurant had 18,977 viewers (38 comments). In October, 2010, rated by *restograf.ro*[21], it got: 8 points for "food", 10 for "atmosphere/ambiance", and 8 for "service"; the readers rating (47 votes) was 5.8 points for "food", 6.94 for "atmosphere/ambiance", and 5.8 for "service". *Malagamba* restaurant had 6,313 viewers (16 comments). In January, 2012, rated by *restograf.ro*[22] it got: 7 points for "food", 9 for "atmosphere/ambiance", and 9 for "service"; the readers rating (222 votes) was 6.97 points for "food", 6.14 for "atmosphere/ambiance", and 4.84 for "service".

[20] See http://www.restograf.ro/restaurant-la-mama-centrul-vechi/.
[21] See http://www.restograf.ro/restaurant-romanesc-crama-domneasca-bucuresti/.
[22] See http://www.restograf.ro/restaurant-malagamba-centrul-vechi-bucuresti/.

When one is looking through the comments of the diners, *inherent antinomies* will come out. Thus, my subjective reading of dinners' experiences merely wants to place suitable lights on their familiar sights. Dealing with a collection of diners' impressions, and not with a statistical sample, my concern will not be to hollow out their average opinion. Instead, I will *carve the shades of their mood*, their feelings loaded with positive and/or negative perceptions, swinging among *anger*, *joy*, *frustration*, *nostalgia*, *disappointment*, or *pleasant surprise*, to name a few markers of the complex dispositional space of the social relation (Givigliano, 2004):

- the anger of someone that found a living ant on her sausages plateau (Mari, May 27th, 2012 at 10:35 pm, about *The Royal Wine Cellar*),
- the joy of someone else that has, on his platter, an amazingly good beef with blueberry sauce (Zeno, April 25th, 2012 at 12:15 am, about *Malagamba*);
- the frustration of the one that ordered tiger shrimps, that let her hungry, and had to rush back home to eat (Irina Vasilachi, December, 2012, about *Malagamba*),
- the *nostalgia* of the other, who rememorizes his childhood in front of a large jar with pickled pear, quince and other nicely arranged fruits in brine (Daniel Baditoiu, July 11th, 2011 at 12:26 pm, about *The Royal Wine Cellar*),
- the disappointment of a couple that ordered two types of pasta, which although bearing different names, had the same type of sauce (Suni, April 27th, 2011 at 2:41 pm, about *Malagamba*),
- the pleasant surprise of a family pair that ate very good seafood risotto and rice with duck breast & lemon (Savu, May 1st, 2012 at 1:23 am, about *Malagamba*).

In-between, people without having a table reservation consider acceptable to wait at the bar several minutes, until they receive a free table, but cannot stand another 15 minutes until the menu arrives (Vali, January 30, 2013 at 1:38 pm, about *At Mom*); others who are asking for a table for two on the terrace are unhappy when they are kindly advice to take a sit inside, since the outside tables are reserved for 6 people or more (Anonymous 3, July 11th, 2012 at 7:04 pm, about *The Royal Wine Cellar*); or others who continue to dine in the same spot though they know that it is a restaurant from the old town that has "area fee" included in the prices, and you do not need to claim for good service (Lia Simidreanu, December 4th, 2012 at 1:09 am, about *Malagamba*).

For each case, the functional clue, has received a mix of judgments, ranging from "I do not recommend the restaurant to anyone, under any circumstances" to "we will definitely come back again". If the state of the art is being *sometimes good, sometimes not so good*, what raises the stake, or, on the contrary, diminishes the status of a particular case, as the theory is saying, depends on the relation with the rest of the clues. Those who do not provide food & service at the similar level to that understood by the mechanic and humanic clues, have high chances to lower their general rating:

> *I had the misfortune to choose the Royal Wine Cellar location for spending an evening with a group of foreign collaborators. At first it was a beautiful evening, crowded and warm. It was expected that will take a little bit more time to be served, so we enjoyed what the location could provide us: a pleasant ambiance, atmosphere and light, without music. The menu came, with normal prices, and we ordered. The dishes were not what we expected* (Doru1, November 4th, 2012 at 3:35 am, about The Royal Wine Cellar).

It was very clear that the atmosphere cannot satisfy you if you stay hungry:

> *I was there Saturday with a group of friends. We chose the restaurant because we knew that it has a foreign chef, complimented enough. The prices are quite high, characteristic of the area, since many foreigners come, even if there's nothing to see. The people from Malagamba tried to do something, but it's far from achieving our expectations. Being close to the Comedy Theatre and the occasionally presence of actors not really help. I do not recommend going at Malagamba, I'm sure that there are great restaurants in the area with better food* (Cristi, May 2nd, 2011 at 12:44 pm, about *Malagamba).*

Of course, the other way around is also possible. When the atmosphere is perfect, the waiters are behaving nicely, and even the food is awesome, a small detail at the functional clue echelon can spoil the day/evening: "We had lunch at your restaurant, at the back terrace, along with several colleagues, 11 people, and we were very excited about the location and the food, but *we were invaded by cockroaches*. Thanks for the food and the staff keeps it on! (Anonymous 2, June 23, 2012 at 3:57 pm, about *The Royal Wine Cellar*). (Yes, that was in the same location in which others have spoken about low quality food, and that is why I felt the need to emphasize once more the issue of inherent antinomies.) Over again, the old communist epoch kind of waiters or the "common Romanian type: bored, without any desire to work, and most important without knowing his job" (Florin, March 27th, 2013 at 12:49 pm, about *At Mom*) increased the feeling of being robbed:

> *I was there with three friends at the recommendation of one of us who regularly frequents that location. After various "no", "we don't have" and "cannot be done" regarding drinks and food but also credit card payment, we got the conclusion that it deserves to go there only if you are lucky. Pity for the location because it looks very good but the service is extremely bad. It was the first (and the last) time when we've been there, and the first impression was totally disappointing for me* (Teodor Marius, November 21st, 2011 at 2:31 pm, about *The Royal Wine Cellar*).

I still want to end this section in an optimistic manner, and to say that the hope is not dead yet as respects the clues of the diners. So, I add not one, but two quotations that include positive evaluations at all three levels:

*I went to this restaurant last evening after I had searched 20 minutes for free seats at the terraces around… everywhere big crowds and 34 degrees although the sun was setting. Within the restaurant I found air conditioning and free tables. I was initially scared, but following the recommendation of someone who had eaten there a few days before I tried though. I went through several large halls, and then in the backyard, sitting at a table near the wall of the Old Court… lanterns, wet grass, armors, a well managed décor. The menu is ok with acceptable prices. The service was ok, the waiter promptly responding to the needs – a young waiter unlike the older ones, who were in the great hall (*Daniel Baditoiu, July 11th, 2011 at 12:26 pm, about *The Royal Wine Cellar).*

I loved the food from Malagamba, the service was very good, I think that is one of the best restaurants from the old center and the ambiance is very good (July, August 6th, 2012 at 3:17 am, about *Malagamba*).

4. CONCLUSION

The *new gastronomy*, as it is understood, among others by the Slow Food's father (*i.e.*, "the study of our place on earth and our survival as a species", as quoted from Alice Waters, 2013), is far wider than is commonly perceived, connecting *agri–/–culture* through producers and consumers, and *trans–/–national* through local-global dialectics. Millions of people, including myself, see the food tied to culture, politics, agriculture or the environment. For me, the gastronomy was a learning-by-doing act, which starts quite soon, in my childhood, about three decades ago. I still remember my younger brother surprise, hidden by his hungry and distrustful eyes, when he saw the scrambled eggs and the French fries passing from the pan in his plate (this is my very first gustatory-olfactory memory).

My journey in the gastronomical realm has begun since. *On the one side*, experimenting on my family members something that barely could be called cooking, then initiating a few friends into the mysteries of cuisine, and later being chef in my own family kitchen, and then disclosing to my young daughter the blueberry pancakes secrets; and *on the other side*, traveling nationally and internationally for academic purposes (or better saying scientific tourism?), encountering in these escapades either ordinary or very sophisticated (disregards of their socio-economic status) farmers, stakeholders, scholars, gourmets, chefs, etc., and not to mention my rural roots, embedded in the mountain areas, I followed, without knowing, the required steps for becoming a *gastronome*.

"You cannot become a gastronome simply by reading books: you need to put your theories into practice; you must be curious, you must try to read reality with your senses, by coming into contact with as many different environments as possible, by talking to people, and by tasting. You cannot become a gastronome simply by eating in a restaurant; you must meet the small farmers,

the people who produce and process food, the people who strive to make the production-consumption system fairer, to render it sustainable and enjoyable" (Petrini, 2013, *Chapter I. A Worrying Picture*).

The gastronomical pair of lens, additionally to that of the social scientist worn daily, became really useful in that rainy day of April 2012 when after several years, we (two researchers usually living 1,300 km apart) met again on the *Malagamba* terrace. I was immediately amazed by the jazz music in the background. I shouted loud: what kind of place is this? The posters, the drawings, the quotes painted on the walls have answered me quickly: Sergiu Malagamba's place. It took a while, as much as we needed to accurately investigate a nice bottle of red dry 2010 Malbec (by Trapiche Oak Cask) and to finish eating the bowl with Penne in tomato sauce, with green olives, capers and smoked anchovies, topped with grated Pecorino cheese, until we figured out that behind these novelties stays John McCarthy's know-how.

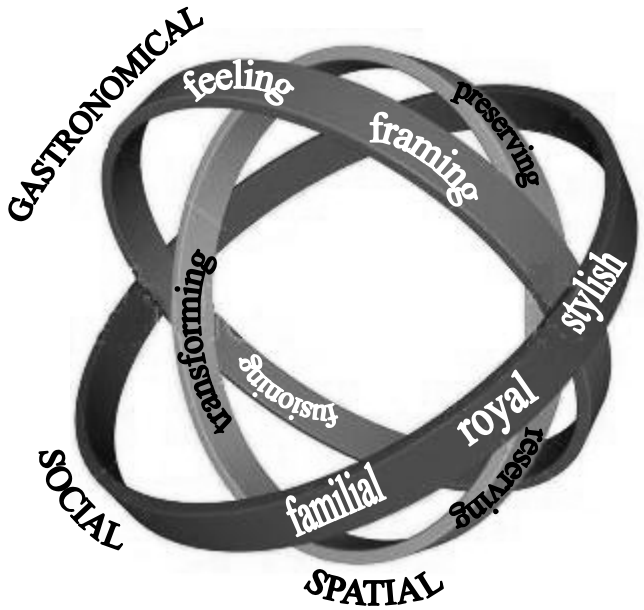

Figure 6. Eating out's circular processes:
where (spatial), *how* (social) and *why* (gastronomical) *to dine*.

At *Malagamba* I definitely ate in "anthropological manner", being deeply absorbed by the *fusion cuisine* that was unfolded in front of my eyes. Later, visiting *At Mom* restaurant, the "sociological way" of eating took the leadership, and the main concern was the slight inadequacy between the family portrait trumpeted by the owner, and the lack of the needed ingredients/contents (*e.g.*, a more familial

atmosphere with a higher degree of intimacy, or unconventional/friendly conversations with the service team), which should have been designed to saturate that image – it was supposed to *feel* mom's presence everywhere. By far, the best performance in staging the play was that of the *The Royal Wine Cellar* waiters who, unfortunately, did not always bring the richness of the alleged details from their acting, also, in the customers' dishes. Nevertheless, with such high *framing* effect, the hunger could wait for a while and, this time, the "ethnographical eater" can temper it with the tantalizing aromas.

Situated at the crossroad between the restaurateurs and the diners, the eating out phenomenon entails the willing of the first category to fulfill the dreams of the last ones, and the desire of the later to comply with the deals of the former. *Preserving* (*At Mom's* case), *reserving* (*The Royal Wine Cellar* case), or *transforming* the food, the ambiance, and the service – *the spatial process* of eating out is in the hands of the restaurant owners, but the costumers, through the medium of their clues, are able to caution any small changes that the restaurateurs do. In this circular process, and also in the other two (*i.e.*, *gastronomical* and *social*), the "seller" and the "buyer" are each other umbilically linked, and they have to take on board the other's opinions, attitudes and behaviors.

Neither hidden in a scientific article, nor flying around as part of the local folklore, these habits are pretty visible, and loudly expressed by *familial*, *royal*, or *stylish* networks, all fighting for the appropriation of the noteworthy parcels of the public realm. The first type, the familial network, is embedded in kinship/ friendship relations – *kinship networks* (Hamberger, Houseman & White, 2011) and *friendship networks* (Wang & Wellman, 2010), the second one consists of "old and new money", respectively *the old aristocracy reminiscences*, *the nouveau riche guilds* (Davis, 2006), and *the high status classes* (Pop, in press), and lastly, the third one is constructed by, or will be as Petrini (2013) hopes for, *alliances of national and international (new) gastronomes*, combined with *local and global connoisseurs* of what should be trans-generationally preserved and stimulated. Like these three items (*i.e.*, familial, royal and stylish), the other two pairs of triplets, which analytically express the spatial and gastronomical circular dynamics – where and how to dine –, were chosen to describe processes within which the items are constantly on the move, permanently reconfiguring themselves. So, what was considered yesterday familial could mean stylish or royal tomorrow, and be labeled as such. The other way around, what at some point was a transformative action could be accounted now as heritage that must be preserved. On the gastronomical dynamics, frequently revisiting a stylish restaurant (that in the meantime could become fashionable), occasionally allows a "downgrading" of its evaluations, which easily could end up by perceiving its fusion cuisine as passé, as something already done in mom's home (which could be also a good thing).

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