

5

A Sociology of Rib Joints

P. D. Holley and D. E. Wright, Jr.



Only barbeque restaurants that feature ribs may be classified as “rib joints.” . . . This ideal type includes the following deviant aspects.

1. A location that is usually difficult to find. . . This joint seldom advertises; patrons learn about it by “word of mouth” and by the occasional “lifestyles” section of some metropolitan newspaper or magazine written by a reporter looking for an “offbeat” story, or by an annual exercise of rating local restaurants. The best rib joints must be searched out . . . utilizing referrals from locals, such as service station attendants.

2. The location may seem “shady,” “suspicious,” or “questionable,” even to a typical patron. The normal reaction to such locations would be uncertainty, if not fear, as to whether one should be in this part of town or in this neck of the woods. . . .

Editor’s Note: Excerpts from “A Sociology of Rib Joints” by P. D. Holley and D. E. Wright, Jr., pp. 73–74, 75–82 in *McDonaldization Revisited: Critical Essays on Consumer Culture*, edited by Mark Alfino et al. Copyright © 1998, Praeger Publishing Company, Westport, CT. Used with permission.

3. A building or facility itself may be of dubious nature, with a run-down exterior, messy woodpile, smokers, and parts scattered around. The interior should represent a mixture of plain and gaudy . . . This is to be opposed to the brightly lit, spic-and-span atmosphere of the mainstream eatery. The restroom may only minimally meet health department standards and may even have a Portapotty out back. . . . The furnishings are “odd,” perhaps reminiscent of the 1950s era. Soot from the smoker may be visible on the ceiling, fan blades, and other places routinely inaccessible to cleaning. Thus, patrons are left to wonder about health department regulations.

4. The staff of a rib joint, and especially the proprietor, may seem of a dubious, shady, deviant nature. Such staff may treat patrons, especially first-time patrons, with what appears as indifference.

5. “Regulars” of the rib joint are disdainful of newcomers, especially if these newcomers seem ill at ease or if the novices are “dressed up.”

THE RIB JOINT EXPERIENCE

Eating ribs is a greasy and messy enterprise. . . .

The attraction of barbeque . . . may well incorporate a unique style of preparation, dependent on the experience, ability, and passion of the pit-boss. Even with a desire for consistency in outcome, unpredictability from one time to the next may reign supreme. Further, there are elements of mystery in that ingredients of the sauces are matters of extreme secrecy. The recipes for everyday eating fail the patron of a rib joint, especially the novice . . . who must abandon the old recipes for eating out and create or learn a new one. In this, one can expect the novice to be uncomfortable and probably not to enjoy the first experience in a rib joint—there is often no menu to be leisurely examined and reviewed. The sometimes impatient server recites a jargon-filled menu that must typically be explained and repeated so that one simply can be sure of what one is hearing. The novice either blindly selects something or is assured by a regular ribber or server to “trust me” on a particular order. In other joints, the menu is posted on the wall, with little in the way of item description or explanation.

Absent are menu items for children; unless they eat ribs, they are out of place. The ideal rib joint is not prepared to serve children and serves them regular meals, allows children to eat off their parents’ plates, or improvises on the spot. Rib eating is for “adults.”

There is no fast food in a rib joint. The food arrives as dictated by the desire of the proprietor or by the dictates of cooking the ribs, which “takes as long as it takes.” Furthermore, when the ribs run out, nothing else can substitute, since there are no other entrée items on the menu.

Dining with others is a social occasion . . . in which to create and demonstrate invidious comparisons among people in terms of respectability. . . . Alternatively, especially in fast-food eateries, dining becomes a safe and routinized activity with no special meaning beyond merely providing sustenance.

None of this is true in ribbing. First, the basics of fire-cooked meat brings to mind something of a dangerous experience. . . . Second, a rib meal is anything but routinized and fast. . . . Further, in its very essence, a rib meal is antisnob, antiyuppie, antihierarchical. Traditionally, a meal wholly or primarily of meat is a sign of egalitarianism among the select few who together partake of the meal. Such a meal meant a time of celebration, a special occasion. The rib meal, consisting of the basics of fire-cooked meat, is interpreted by many ribbers as a return to “primal,” basically a return to times before status hierarchies became institutionalized and the practice of eating became cluttered with “manners” and a seemingly endless variety of equipment.

Ribbing is an “earthy” experience. It is difficult if not impossible to pretend to be better than others with food in one’s hand, with grease and sauce on one’s mouth and hands, and wearing a bib and/or a napkin stuck in the neck of one’s shirt.

The rib joint’s fare itself is messy. And, even with the improvements in pork quality, it is in opposition to the current “health food” craze which emphasizes small and infrequent helpings of low-fat, well-cooked meat.

It is difficult to have what most etiquette books would consider to be “bad table manners” in a rib joint. One is expected to have a “dirty-fingers, greasy mouth, crunchy-bone experience.” In a rib joint, one eats with one’s hands; puts one’s elbows on the table; wears a bib or even places a napkin in one’s shirt or uses many paper towels as napkins (from a paper towel roll prominently displayed on the table); gets one’s face smeared; passes food from one person to another and/or from one plate to another; smacks one’s lips; exclaims loudly about how good the food is; licks one’s fingers and lips so as not to miss a drop of meat, juice, and sauce; and freely and openly uses toothpicks. As one eats, one begins to stack the gnawed-bare bones in a pile on the table, clearly as a trophy of one’s accomplishments. In short, one must unlearn “good table manners.” Neither Julia Child nor Emily Post—both of whom would heartily disdain rib table manners—is likely to show up for a meal at a rib joint. . . .

Part of the meaning of ribbing is counter to modern society; it is a rebellious act. Further, it is an act imbued with a “we against the world” attitude, or at least a “we against the ‘straights,’” that is to say against those who do not “do ribs.” In doing ribs, one is, among other things, thumbing one’s nose at mainstream society. Ribbers see themselves as independent from mainstream customs, free from the need to be well thought of. Last, there develops among ribbers an ethnocentrism, an aloofness toward the outside

world, toward those who put on airs, and toward those who eschew ribs. Ribbers are smug in their knowledge that they understand what truly fine food and good eating are. Simultaneously, ribbers pity and ridicule those not initiated to ribs.

THE RIB JOINT PROPRIETOR

There are few true “individualists” any longer, but the rib joint proprietor may qualify. Typically, the proprietor is male and something of a reprobate, someone who has chosen to avoid or leave the mainstream of typical employment and working for someone else, having chosen to enter one of the most failure prone of businesses, the food-services business. Further, the proprietor is in a business little known and little appreciated by the society at large, as evidenced by the small number of rib joints in the United States. . . . To open a rib joint would seem like “risky business” indeed. However, success in the common sense seems not to be the major motivating force. While not opposed to financial success, most rib joint proprietors appear to be motivated more by a desire to get out of the mainstream and by the desire to provide a good meal for their patrons. . . . Many . . . refuse to do what would be necessary for fame and fortune, choosing instead to serve friends and to enjoy themselves. In this, most rib joint proprietors have a demeanor that seems to say “take me as I am—I am not changing; if I cannot make it as I am, I will do something else.” . . .

At best a marginal person, the proprietor has the ability to interact with and serve those of varying socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and to make the dining experience an enjoyable one, to which many return. Usually serving as owner, manager, cashier, server, and cook (or pit-boss), the proprietor presents himself to the customer in active, multiple, and unique ways. . . .

One rule intimately known by ribbers is “call first.” Rib joints are notorious for opening and closing at odd hours. In many joints, the proprietor prepares a certain number of slabs of ribs per day—when those are sold, the doors are closed. Often, the owner will close the joint for a month or so while on vacation, fully expecting the clientele to return when he is ready to get back to work.

The rib joint proprietor possesses a passion, a vision, a method, and a secret. The passion is for ribs—real barbeque. His vision is to serve up the best ribs there are, and on a regular basis. The method he has perfected over time, combining particular woods, a certain type of smoker, the application of a marinade, a rub and/or sauce, particular cuts of meat, involves slow cooking with periods of doing nothing interspersed with the attention and care of a perfectionist. Sauces, sometimes invented by the pit-boss, and at

other times inherited from family members or friends, represent a crowning achievement. Unique sauces . . . have certain ingredients as carefully guarded secrets. Unique dry rubs . . . maintain ingredients as mysterious.

When the rib joint proprietor dies (or for some reason closes the operation), the continuation of the joint is not at all certain. Sauce secrets may be taken to the grave. Children or other employees may have neither the skill, experience, or passion possessed by the proprietor. Food quality may not be consistent with that of the founder. Or, there may be conflict among spouses, children, other relatives, and others over ownership, control, and management of the joint, as in the case of the Wild Horse Bar-B-Que. These factors seem to explain the tenuous life of the rib joint.

RIB JOINT PATRONS

Ritzer delineates three types of people based on their attitudes and behavior toward “McDonaldization.” The first type refers to those who view the consequences of rationalization as constituting a “velvet cage” connoting that these patrons like McDonald’s and welcome it. The second view the consequences as a “rubber cage” with both advantages and disadvantages from which they occasionally and temporarily seek escape. The third group shares with Weber the belief that the disadvantages are more numerous and are similar to an ever-expanding “iron cage” from which ultimately there may be no escape. The velvet cagers always eat at the McDonald’s of the modern world, the rubber cagers eat there during the work week and when pressed for time, and the iron cagers never eat there and are fearful that McDonald’s will soon be the only type of eatery available.

The velvet cagers would of their volition never select a rib joint. Such persons, when found in rib joints, arrive reluctantly, in the company of others who persuaded them against their “better judgment,” and are unlikely to return again. These people are not likely to order ribs, unless there is nothing else on the menu; if they have ribs, they may attempt to cut the meat from the bone and consume the meat with a fork. These patrons are noticeably uncomfortable and consider rib joints as barbaric and archaic. They are people who do not want eating and dining to be an adventure.

Patrons who are in the rubber cage category are like “weekend warriors” who are looking for an alternative to the ho-hum routine of the week and not content with certain features of the fast-food eateries. They are willing to risk some uncertainty in finding alternatives—on occasion. While frequenting “barbeque restaurants,” these patrons may also wander into a rib joint by accident but are adventurous enough to brave the deviant (or is it, in their eyes, “cute”?) aspects of the joint to stay and try the main dish. Such patrons will even follow the local custom of throwing good table manners

to the winds and dine in appropriate rib fashion; in short, they enjoy themselves. Such rubber cagers may return on more than one occasion and bring others with them. However, these people view ribbing as a sometime thing to do when one has time and as only one of numerous alternatives to fast-food eateries. Last, rib joint patrons of this second type do not qualify as the ideal type patron in that they remain attached to the highly rationalized fast-food eateries and do not internalize an image of themselves as being first and foremost rib connoisseurs.

It should be noted that the rubber cagers are both boon and bane to the rib joint proprietor. On the one hand, they constitute a healthy portion of the joint's clientele, help to popularize particular joints, and introduce first-timers who may eventually become aficionados. On the other hand, these patrons tend truly not to understand the culture and significance of rib joints and from time to time contaminate the joint with culture from the outside world; examples would be for these patrons, who have dined in the joint on occasion, to believe that the proprietor is indebted to them, to expect that they can make special requests, or to be in a hurry. Further, by popularizing the joint, the rubber cagers may serve, unintentionally, to destroy the joint by making it too successful.

The third type of patron is those who view the McDonald's of the world as anathema—pure disaster. As patrons of rib joints, these people do so by choice—indeed, the rib joint is the first thought when eating out occurs. These regulars view themselves as “ribbers” or “rib addicts” and thoroughly delight in the ambiance, decor, food, and manners (or lack thereof) of the joint. These people also differ from the previous type in that for the true rib joint patron, eating here is not a sometime affair to be done when one happens to think about it or when one has enough time. The true patron *always* thinks first of ribs and makes time for them. These patrons are like “sojourners” who “pine for the old days” and view themselves as out of touch with the modern, as alienated from modern food culture. They do not necessarily romanticize the past, but they prefer it when it comes to dining. Further, these patrons view the velvet cagers with disdain and the rubber cagers with wariness. True patrons may even attempt to discourage the first-timers or velvet cagers from staying or returning. The wariness toward the rubber cagers is because of the possibility that they may over-popularize the joint, or make it so successful that the joint and proprietor become upscale.

THE FUTURE OF THE RIB JOINT

In sum, the rib joint and a rib meal are anachronisms. The very nature of the rib joint makes it unlikely that ribbing will catch on as has Mexican and Italian dining. Franchises, drive-up windows, faster service, and so on may all

52 BASICS, STUDIES, APPLICATIONS, EXTENSIONS

find their way into fringes of the rib culture. Barbeque establishments may be located in malls. However, the uniqueness of the food, the proprietor, and the patrons guarantees restricted popularity and limited expansion. . . .

The steady pace of modernization with its emphasis on speed, efficiency, impersonalization, and processing is another source of concern for the rib joint subculture. The very success of some rib joints has caused some proprietors and some businesspeople (ever attentive to making a buck) from outside the subculture to attempt “rationalizing” the rib meal and to make of it the next “McDonald’s.” Were the rib joint given too much attention, were it to be mass marketed and mainstreamed, the rib joint as described here would die. . . .

But, it is our prediction that the rib joint will persist. We further predict that the rib joint will remain outside the mainstream food culture. . . .

A major factor in the perpetuation of the rib joint is the modernization process and its tendency to “McDonaldize” everything it touches. Rib joints are out-of-step anachronisms, throwbacks to other times, like the “mom and pop” corner stores with their more personalized and less mechanized, less standardized services. To the extent there is a backlash to the modern, whether this backlash is for only the weekend experiment or as a way of life, rib joints will find a niche in the effort to correct for the alienating effects of modernity. To the extent that poor, yet entrepreneurial men and women are produced in this culture, the rib joint will persist. . . .

Long live the rib joint!

Thinking Critically

1. What is the future of the “rib joint” in the age of McDonaldization?
2. What is it about rib joints that might lead people to eat in them?
3. What is it about rib joints that might lead people to pass them up and eat in fast-food restaurants?
4. In what ways is the rib joint an anachronism?
5. In what ways is the critique of McDonaldization animated by a romanticization of places like rib joints?

In this chapter, Bryman applies his four elements of Disneyization to McDonald's and finds that the latter is, to a large degree, Disneyized. (In other words, he has shown how Disney is McDonaldized in various ways.) The following are the basic dimensions of Disneyization that characterize McDonald's.

Theming. *This is the "story," really "stories," that McDonald's tells about itself and communicates aggressively to everyone it comes into contact with—suppliers, workers, and especially consumers. There actually are many different stories (for children, parents, teenagers, grandparents, etc.), but one overall theme is that this is a "happy" place for all. This happiness is found in the smile of counter people and of Ronald McDonald, as well as in the "Happy Meal."*

Merchandising. *McDonald's sells all sorts of stuff beyond the food on offer at the restaurants. Most notable are various toy promotions as well as the merchandise for sale on its Web site.*

Dedifferentiation of Consumption. *This involves the interpenetration of various forms of consumption, for example, when McDonald's promotes Disney movies and McDonald's restaurants are found in Disney theme parks. Another is the existence of McDonald's restaurants in shopping malls where many other things are for sale.*

Emotional Labor. *McDonald's employees are expected not only to smile, but to be friendly and happy.*
