

Sarah Arensman

Ethnography # 3

For this ethnography I decided to put together some comparisons that I have noticed in several different ethnic restaurants. Our first “authentic” ethnic restaurant was in Little Italy last Friday night. We ate on the street at a family-run Italian restaurant. Right away, I noticed the cooperative efforts among the workers. They were busy all over the place, clearing away used dishes, refilling water glasses, bringing more bread, etc. They did not directly interact much with Scott and I apart from taking our order, but they paid a lot of attention to the kids, talking to them and joking with them as they went in and out of the doors to the inside. They seemed to take a lot of pride in the food, how it was presented and the quality of the meal. The atmosphere was loud, but not annoyingly so. I thought it might have been just because we were outside, but when I went inside to the restrooms it was the same – loud, lots of talking and laughing among both the workers and the customers. This restaurant was filled with mostly tourists and did not appear to be a “regulars” sort of place.

Saturday we ate dinner at a taco place in Astoria. This was our second time eating there and we ordered the same things as the time before. Interestingly, the food was not the same. The tacos were filled with different ingredients than before. The nachos also were different, this time there was meat and guacamole on them instead of just beans and cheese like before. *I wonder if you just get what they have rather than fixed, specific items?* The atmosphere here was quiet and reserved. We were the only Caucasians in the restaurant. All the other patrons were Latino. The waitress was not overly attentive to our table, but did not seem to be attentive to the others either. She was nice enough, just not animated as the Italians had been.

Sunday night Scott and I went out alone to a German restaurant in Forest Hills. One of the owners greeted us with a heavy German accent at the door. He remembered Scott from two nights before when he had gone there with the pastor of Ascension Church. He warmly escorted us to a table. There was a woman, dressed in traditional German attire, playing an accordion in the lobby. A group of people who were obviously friends were sitting together near the small bar, conversing with the owners who were drinking some sort of liquor from a small snifter. Our waiter was very friendly and attentive. The place was relatively quiet, except for the accordion. There were several other tables of patrons who looked like residents, not tourists. The two owners went around and spoke to each table for several minutes, coming to our table as well. They appeared to know nearly all their customers as did the waitstaff. The food was well-presented and our waiter checked back many times to be sure that we were pleased. There was no sense of busyness or hurry but more a sense of one-big-family – very warm and personal.

Finally, Monday we took the family to a Korean restaurant in Flushing. It was an authentic place with everything written in Korean, live fish in tanks and an all-Korean staff. We were the only Caucasians there. Here, it seemed like the entire staff waited on us rather than one designated waiter. We went with some Korean friends who could interpret the menu and explain the dishes to us. The waitstaff was far more attentive to us

than to our Korean friends. Food kept appearing on the table until there was no room for even one more dish. Joe remarked that a lot of the dishes were being brought out as a compliment, and were not part of our order. We never needed anything – they brought extra napkins, spoons, plates, whatever we needed automatically. The food was served family-style down the table, with small separate bowls for each side dish and condiment. Customers share the dishes and eat out of all of them with their own chopsticks. The rest of the patrons were Korean and the difference in the service we received and they received was pronounced. The atmosphere was quiet but efficient – friendly but not boisterous. When we left ALL the waitstaff said goodbye to us – they had all helped take care of us.

The differences in the four restaurants could be attributed to many things: culture, location within the city, personality of the staff, caliber of restaurant, etc. More observation of each culture represented: Italian, Latino, German, Korean, in different contexts would help me to determine if the restaurant experiences resemble the culture in general.