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**“Porky Times”: A Brief Gastrobiography of New York’s The Spotted Pig**  
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*Donna Lee Brien*

## **Introduction**

With a deluge of mouthwatering pre-publicity, the opening of The Spotted Pig, the USA’s first self-identified British-styled gastropub, in Manhattan in February 2004 was much anticipated. The late Australian chef, food writer and restaurateur Mietta O’Donnell has noted how “taking over a building or business which has a long established reputation can be a mixed blessing” because of the way that memories “can enrich the experience of being in a place or they can just make people nostalgic”. Bistro Le Zoo, the previous eatery on the site, had been very popular when it opened almost a decade earlier, and its closure was mourned by some diners (Young; Kaminsky “Feeding Time”; Steinhauer & McGinty). This regret did not, however, appear to affect The Spotted Pig’s success. As esteemed *New York Times* reviewer Frank Bruni noted in his 2006 review: “Almost immediately after it opened [...] the throngs started to descend, and they have never stopped”. The following year, The Spotted Pig was awarded a Michelin star—the first year that Michelin ranked New York—and has kept this star in the subsequent annual rankings.

## **Writing Restaurant Biography**

Detailed studies have been published of almost every type of contemporary organisation including public institutions such as schools, hospitals, museums and universities, as well as non-profit organisations such as charities and professional associations. These are often written to mark a major milestone, or some significant change, development or the demise of the organisation under consideration (Brien). Detailed studies have also recently been published of businesses as diverse as general stores (Woody), art galleries (Fossi), fashion labels (Koda *et al.*), record stores (Southern & Branson), airlines (Byrnes; Jones), confectionary companies (Chinn) and builders (Garden). In terms of attracting mainstream readerships, however, few such studies seem able to capture popular reader interest as those about eating establishments including restaurants and cafés. This form of restaurant life history is, moreover, not restricted to ‘quality’ establishments. Fast food restaurant chains have attracted their share of studies (see, for example Love; Jakle & Sculle), ranging from business-economic analyses (Liu), socio-cultural political analyses (Watson), and memoirs (Kroc & Anderson), to criticism around their conduct and effects (Striffler). Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* is the most well-known published critique of the fast food industry and its effects with, famously, the *Rolling Stone* article on which it was based generating more reader mail than any other piece run in the 1990s. The book itself (researched narrative creative nonfiction), moreover, made a fascinating transition to the screen, transformed into a fictionalised drama (co-written by Schlosser) that narrates the content of the book from the point of view of a series of fictional/composite characters involved in the industry, rather than in a documentary format. Akin to the range of studies of fast food restaurants, there are also a variety of studies of eateries in US motels, caravan parks,

diners and service station restaurants (see, for example, Baeder). Although there has been little study of this sub-genre of food and drink publishing, their popularity can be explained, at least in part, because such volumes cater to the significant readership for writing about food related topics of all kinds, with food writing recently identified as mainstream literary fare in the USA and UK (Hughes) and an entire “publishing subculture” in Australia (Dunstan & Chaitman). Although no exact tally exists, an informed estimate by the founder of the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards and president of the Paris Cookbook Fair, Edouard Cointreau, has more than 26,000 volumes on food and wine related topics currently published around the world annually (ctd. in Andriani “Gourmand Awards”).

The readership for publications about restaurants can also perhaps be attributed to the wide range of information that can be included a single study. My study of a selection of these texts from the UK, USA and Australia indicates that this can include narratives of place and architecture dealing with the restaurant’s location, locale and design; narratives of directly food-related subject matter such as menus, recipes and dining trends; and narratives of people, in the stories of its proprietors, staff and patrons. Detailed studies of contemporary individual establishments commonly take the form of authorised narratives either written by the owners, chefs or other staff with the help of a food journalist, historian or other professional writer, or produced largely by that writer with the assistance of the premise’s staff. These studies are often extensively illustrated with photographs and, sometimes, drawings or reproductions of other artworks, and almost always include recipes. Two examples of these from my own collection include a centennial history of a famous New Orleans eatery that survived Hurricane Katrina, *Galatoire’s Cookbook*. Written by employees—the chief operating officer/general manager (Melvin Rodrigue) and publicist (Jyl Benson)—this incorporates reminiscences from both other staff and patrons. The second is another study of a New Orleans’ restaurant, this one by the late broadcaster and celebrity local historian Mel Leavitt. *The Court of Two Sisters Cookbook: With a History of the French Quarter and the Restaurant*, compiled with the assistance of the Two Sisters’ proprietor, Joseph Fein Joseph III, was first published in 1992 and has been so enduringly popular that it is in its eighth printing. These texts, in common with many others of this type, trace a triumph-over-adversity company history that incorporates a series of mildly scintillating anecdotes, lists of famous chefs and diners, and signature recipes. Although obviously focused on an external readership, they can also be characterised as an instance of what David M. Boje calls an organisation’s “story performance” (106) as the process of creating these narratives mobilises an organisation’s (in these cases, a commercial enterprise’s) internal information processing and narrative building activities.

Studies of contemporary restaurants are much more rarely written without any involvement from the eatery’s personnel. When these are, the results tend to have much in common with more critical studies such as *Fast Food Nation*, as well as so-called architectural ‘building biographies’ which attempt to narrate the historical and social forces that “explain the shapes and uses” (Ellis, Chao & Parrish 70) of the physical structures we create. Examples of this would include Harding’s study of the importance of the Boeuf sur le Toit in Parisian life in the 1920s and Middlebrook’s social history of London’s Strand Corner House. Such work agrees with Kopytoff’s assertion—following Appadurai’s proposal that objects possess their own ‘biographies’ which need to be researched and expressed—that such inquiry can reveal not only information about the objects under consideration, but also about readers as we

examine our “cultural [...] aesthetic, historical, and even political” responses to these narratives (67). The life story of a restaurant will necessarily be entangled with those of the figures who have been involved in its establishment and development, as well as the narratives they create around the business. This following brief study of The Spotted Pig, however, written without the assistance of the establishment’s personnel, aims to outline a life story for this eatery in order to reflect upon the pig’s place in contemporary dining practice in New York as raw foodstuff, fashionable comestible, product, brand, symbol and marketing tool, as well as, at times, purely as an animal identity.

## The Spotted Pig

Widely profiled before it even opened, The Spotted Pig is reportedly one of the city’s “most popular” restaurants (Michelin 349). It is profiled in all the city guidebooks I could locate in print and online, featuring in some of these as a key stop on recommended itineraries (see, for instance, Otis 39). A number of these proclaim it to be the USA’s first ‘gastropub’—the term first used in 1991 in the UK to describe a casual hotel/bar with good food and reasonable prices (Farley). The Spotted Pig is thus styled on a shabby-chic version of a traditional British hotel, featuring a cluttered-but-well arranged use of pig-themed objects and illustrations that is described by latest *Michelin Green Guide of New York City* as “a country-cute décor that still manages to be hip” (Michelin 349). From the three-dimensional carved pig hanging above the entrance in a homage to the shingles of traditional British hotels, to the use of its image on the menu, website and souvenir tee-shirts, the pig as motif proceeds its use as a foodstuff menu item. So much so, that the restaurant is often (affectionately) referred to by patrons and reviewers simply as ‘The Pig’.

The restaurant has become so well known in New York in the relatively brief time it has been operating that it has not only featured in a number of novels and memoirs, but, moreover, little or no explanation has been deemed necessary as the signifier of “The Spotted Pig” appears to convey everything that needs to be said about an eatery of quality and fashion. In the thriller *Lethal Experiment: A Donovan Creed Novel*, when John Locke’s hero has to leave the restaurant and becomes involved in a series of dangerous escapades, he wants nothing more but to get back to his dinner (107, 115). The restaurant is also mentioned a number of times in *Sex and the City* author Candace Bushnell’s *Lipstick Jungle* in relation to a (fictional) new movie of the same name. The joke in the book is that the character doesn’t know of the restaurant (26). In David Goodwillie’s *American Subversive*, the story of a journalist-turned-blogger and a homegrown terrorist set in New York, the narrator refers to “Scarlett Johansson, for instance, and the hostess at the Spotted Pig” (203-4) as the epitome of attractiveness. The Spotted Pig is also mentioned in Suzanne Guillette’s memoir, *Much to Your Chagrin*, when the narrator is on a dinner date but fears running into her ex-boyfriend: ‘Jack lives somewhere in this vicinity [...] Vaguely, you recall him telling you he was not too far from the Spotted Pig on Greenwich—now, was it Greenwich Avenue or Greenwich Street?’ (361). The author presumes readers know the right answer in order to build tension in this scene.

Although this success is usually credited to the joint efforts of backer, music executive turned restaurateur Ken Friedman, his partner, well-known chef, restaurateur, author and television personality Mario Batali, and their UK-born and trained chef, April Bloomfield (see, for instance, Batali), a significant part has been built on Bloomfield’s

pork cookery. The very idea of a “spotted pig” itself raises a central tenet of Bloomfield’s pork/food philosophy which is sustainable and organic. That is, not the mass produced, industrially farmed pig which produces a leaner meat, but the fatty, tastier varieties of pig such as the heritage six-spotted Berkshire which is “darker, more heavily marbled with fat, juicier and richer-tasting than most pork” (Fabricant). Bloomfield has, indeed, made pig’s ears—long a Chinese restaurant staple in the city and a key ingredient of Southern US soul food as well as some traditional Japanese and Spanish dishes—fashionable fare in the city, and her current incarnation, a crispy pig’s ear salad with lemon caper dressing (TSP 2010) is much acclaimed by reviewers. This approach to ingredients—using the ‘whole beast’, local whenever possible, and the concentration on pork—has been underlined and enhanced by a continuing relationship with UK chef Fergus Henderson. In his series of London restaurants under the banner of “St. John”, Henderson is famed for the approach to pork cookery outlined in his two books *Nose to Tail Eating: A Kind of British Cooking*, published in 1999 (re-published both in the UK and the US as *The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating*), and *Beyond Nose to Tail: A Kind of British Cooking: Part II* (coauthored with Justin Piers Gellatly in 2007). Henderson has indeed been identified as starting a trend in dining and food publishing, focusing on sustainably using as food the entirety of any animal killed for this purpose, but which mostly focuses on using all parts of pigs. In publishing, this includes Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s *The River Cottage Meat Book*, Peter Kaminsky’s *Pig Perfect*, subtitled *Encounters with Some Remarkable Swine and Some Great Ways to Cook Them*, John Barlow’s *Everything but the Squeal: Eating the Whole Hog in Northern Spain* and Jennifer McLagan’s *Fat: An Appreciation of a Misunderstood Ingredient, with Recipes* (2008). In restaurants, it certainly includes The Spotted Pig.

So pervasive has embrace of whole beast pork consumption been in New York that, by 2007, Bruni could write that these are: “porky times, fatty times, which is to say very good times indeed. Any new logo for the city could justifiably place the Big Apple in the mouth of a spit-roasted pig” (Bruni). This demand set the stage perfectly for, in October 2007, Henderson to travel to New York to cook pork-rich menus at The Spotted Pig in tandem with Bloomfield (Royer). He followed this again in 2008 and, by 2009, this annual event had become known as “FergusStock” and was covered by local as well as UK media, and a range of US food weblogs. By 2009, it had grown to become a dinner at the Spotted Pig with half the dishes on the menu by Henderson and half by Bloomfield, and a dinner the next night at David Chang’s acclaimed Michelin-starred Momofuku Noodle Bar, which is famed for its Cantonese-style steamed pork belly buns. A third dinner (and then breakfast/brunch) followed at Friedman/Bloomfield’s Breslin Bar and Dining Room (discussed below) (Rose). The Spotted Pig dinners have become famed for Henderson’s pig’s head and pork trotter dishes with the chef himself recognising that although his wasn’t “the most obvious food to cook for America”, it was the case that “at St John, if a couple share a pig’s head, they tend to be American” (qtd. in Rose). In 2009, the pigs’ head were presented in pies which Henderson has described as “puff pastry casing, with layers of chopped, cooked pig’s head and potato, so all the lovely, bubbly pig’s head juices go into the potato” (qtd. in Rose).

Bloomfield was aged only 28 when, in 2003, with a recommendation from Jamie Oliver, she interviewed for, and won, the position of executive chef of The Spotted Pig (Fabricant; Q&A). Following this introduction to the US, her reputation as a chef has grown based on the strength of her pork expertise. Among a host of awards, she was named one of US *Food & Wine* magazine’s ten annual Best New Chefs in 2007. In

2009, she was a featured solo session titled "Pig, Pig, Pig" at the fourth Annual International Chefs Congress, a prestigious New York City based event where "the world's most influential and innovative chefs, pastry chefs, mixologists, and sommeliers present the latest techniques and culinary concepts to their peers" (Starchefs.com). Bloomfield demonstrated breaking down a whole suckling St. Canut milk raised piglet, after which she butterflied, rolled and slow-poached the belly, and fried the ears. As well as such demonstrations of expertise, she is also often called upon to provide expert comment on pork-related news stories, with The Spotted Pig regularly the subject of that food news. For example, when a rare, heritage Hungarian pig was profiled as a "new" New York pork source in 2009, this story arose because Bloomfield had served a Mangalitsa/Berkshire crossbreed pig belly and trotter dish with Agen prunes (Sanders) at The Spotted Pig. Bloomfield was quoted as the authority on the breed's flavour and heritage authenticity: "it took me back to my grandmother's kitchen on a Sunday afternoon, windows steaming from the roasting pork in the oven [...] This pork has that same authentic taste" (qtd. in Sanders). Bloomfield has also used this expert profile to support a series of pork-related causes. These include the Thanksgiving Farm in the Catskill area, which produces free range pork for its resident special needs children and adults, and helps them gain meaningful work-related skills in working with these pigs. Bloomfield not only cooks for the project's fundraisers, but also purchases any excess pigs for The Spotted Pig (Estrine 103).

This strong focus on pork is not, however, exclusive. The Spotted Pig is also one of a number of American restaurants involved in the Meatless Monday campaign, whereby at least one vegetarian option is included on menus in order to draw attention to the benefits of a plant-based diet. When, in 2008, Bloomfield beat the Iron Chef in the sixth season of the US version of the eponymous television program, the central ingredient was nothing to do with pork—it was olives. Diversifying from this focus on 'pig' can, however, be dangerous. Friedman and Bloomfield's next enterprise after The Spotted Pig was The John Dory seafood restaurant at the corner of 10th Avenue and 16th Street. This opened in November 2008 to reviews that its food was "uncomplicated and nearly perfect" (Andrews 22), won Bloomfield *Time Out New York's* 2009 "Best New Hand at Seafood" award, but was not a success. The John Dory was a more formal, but smaller, restaurant that was more expensive at a time when the financial crisis was just biting, and was closed the following August. Friedman blamed the layout, size and neighbourhood (Stein) and its reservation system, which limited walk-in diners (ctd. in Vallis), but did not mention its non-pork, seafood orientation. When, almost immediately, another Friedman/Bloomfield project was announced, the Breslin Bar & Dining Room (which opened in October 2009 in the Ace Hotel at 20 West 29<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway), the enterprise was closely modeled on the The Spotted Pig. In preparation, its senior management—Bloomfield, Friedman and sous-chefs, Nate Smith and Peter Cho (who was to become the Breslin's head chef)—undertook a tasting tour of the UK that included Henderson's St. John Bread & Wine Bar (Leventhal). Following this, the Breslin's menu highlighted a series of pork dishes such as terrines, sausages, ham and potted styles (Rosenberg & McCarthy), with even Bloomfield's pork scratchings (crispy pork rinds) bar snacks garnering glowing reviews (see, for example, Severson; Ghorbani). Reviewers, moreover, waxed lyrically about the menu's pig-based dishes, the *New York Times* reviewer identifying this focus as catering to New York diners' "fetish for pork fat" (Sifton). This representative review details not only "an entree of gently smoked pork belly that's been roasted to tender

goo, for instance, over a drift of buttery mashed potatoes, with cabbage and bacon on the side" but also a pig's foot "in gravy made of reduced braising liquid, thick with pillowy shallots and green flecks of deconstructed brussels sprouts" (Sifton). Sifton concluded with the proclamation that this style of pork was "very good: meat that is fat; fat that is meat".

## Concluding remarks

Bloomfield has listed Michael Ruhlman's *Charcuterie* as among her favourite food books. *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called Ruhlman "a food poet, and the pig is his muse" (Q&A). In August 2009, it was reported that Bloomfield had always wanted to write a cookbook (Marx) and, in July 2010, HarperCollins imprint Ecco publisher and foodbook editor Dan Halpern announced that he was planning a book with her, tentatively titled, *A Girl and Her Pig* (Andriani "Ecco Expands"). As a "cookbook with memoir running throughout" (Maurer), this will discuss the influence of the pig on her life as well as how to cook pork. This text will obviously also add to the data known about The Spotted Pig, but until then, this brief gastrobiography has attempted to outline some of the human, and in this case, animal, stories that lie behind all businesses.

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