

The New Future of Fast Food

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In November 2011, on a lo-fi, now-dormant food-blog of mine, *Food Spiral*, I offered up an *esquisse* of my ideal eating establishment, which I named “Blick’s” (no relation to the art supply store). This Blick’s was a fast-food restaurant, though of a different typology. Rather than hamburgers, fries, chicken fingers, or soft-serve, all of its cuisine was composed of the same pan-nutritional substance, Blickum, and each Blick’s meal weighed in at exactly 2000 calories and fulfilled the entirety of your RDI (Recommended Daily Intake). In other words, two years before the invention of Soylent, Blick’s was a speculative fast-foodery with a Soylent-like substance at the center of its business model. For me, the implications were far more than dietary or gustatory; they were gastronomical in the widest sense. Food is always situated and consumed within a culture— a culture with specific distinctions, encodings, norms, systems, and extra-dietary, extra-gustatory significations. Blick’s gave me a chance to shove American gastronomy through an “involution,” particularly with respect that denigrated staple of our landscape, fast food. Now that Soylent and a number of Soylent-like products are on the market and successful, I present this *esquisse* once again, revamped, re-examined, with the hopes of finding some takers.

This involution depended foremost on certain material substances— first the imaginary Blickum and later in reality Soylent— that undermined both the received “nature” and “culture” of food. As emphasized in the work of Lucy Chinen and Sean Raspet (both touchstones throughout this grey paper), the chemical senses of food experience— taste and smell— suffer from an instinctual “neophobia,” an enduring aversion to the new or unrecognized. When it comes to food and its aesthetics, this neophobia gets even finickier: food must originate in “nature” and its flavors and aromas must remain mimetic of this nature, even when they themselves are artificially produced. The greatest possible gustatory heresy, then, is any foodstuff which is (1) made in a lab, (2) with no model in nature and (3) with an unplaceable, unprecedented flavor or aroma. And this is— you guessed it— the future of pan-nutritional substances. Aes-

thetically speaking, neophobia is not limited to the chemical senses. Synthetic instruments and electronically created music were, for years, blinkered by the expectations of a mimesis of violins, pianos, horns, or the human voice. Only after years of acclimation and musicalization did the public come to love and accept electronic or acousmatic sounds for their own musical merits. It took time, re-culturation, and the stridency of Kraftwerk, but the general public eventually relaxed its need for origin, mimesis, and recognizability.

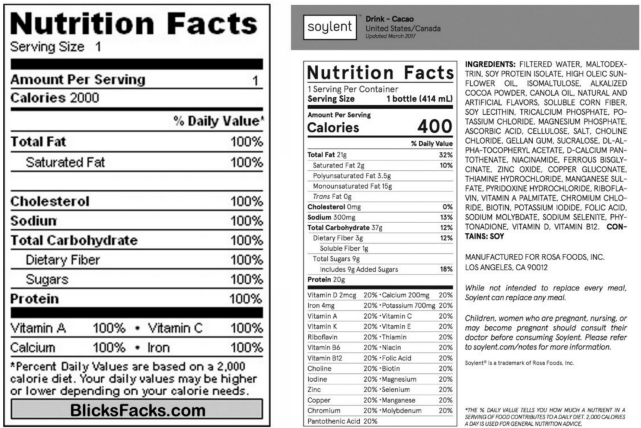


FIGURE 1. Pan-Nutritional Substances

With food and smell, it could be argued— and has— that the neophobia arose as a survival mechanism: if you don’t recognize the taste or smell as food— as delicious even— it’s probably wiser left alone. However, instincts can be over-ridden. They can be redirected. And this is what’s so odd about the common discourse around food: in few other facets of life does the nature-culture distinction so thoroughly break down, yet rarely do we witness “Nature” and “Culture” so uncritically maintained and marketed as pure, yet mutually reliant, antinomian categories. All food preparation— that is, anything outside of gathering berries and chewing raw meat of the bone— modifies nature. The passage from farm to table is also “processing,” and the differences between “natural” and “artificial” ingredients and flavors are often a matter of degree, if not wholly of rhetoric. In fact, an unexamined adherence to “Nature” can lead to deleterious

effects on the natural world. As Raspet and Chinen point out, in defense of GMOs and *à propos* of their algae-based *non/food* products, traditional cuisine and organic farming are often more resource intensive than many modified foods or other possible practices, and hence more destructive of the natural environment to which they've so conspicuously sworn fidelity. Better than fidelity or imagined proximity to nature would be breaking things down into pragmatic questions: *is this food healthy? Do I care if it's healthy? Is its flavor or aroma delicious? Do I care if it's delicious? Is it interesting? What does it mean? How is it integrated into our lives? Is it ethical— and according to which ethics? Is it sustainable? Is it affordable? Is it affordable for everybody? How long does it take? What can I do with it? And finally, can I get it to go?*

We can answer these questions from the bottom up, building on what Lucy Chinen in her essay *Corbusier's Kitchen* calls “modular tastes,” free from nature or pre-conception: “*The future of flavor is non-mimetic or non-skeuomorphic.*” Here, eateries like Blick's and pan-nutritional substances like Soylent offer a clean slate.

“Blick's is America's first entirely hylomorphic dinner menu. What this means is that every entrée at Blick's is made from the very same substance— a supersubstance, Blickum— that is then pressed into different shapes, phases, and textures, and infused with a variety of natural and artificial flavorings. There are square Blinks, round Blinks, iced Blinks, grilled Blinks with a side of bitesize Blinks-babies. Spicy Blinks. Slick Blinks. Invisi-Blinks. Bloomin' Blinks. Blinks for all occasions. And for all you weirdos out there, we also have special-diet Blinks available in a plexiglass-trunk: Veggie and Vegan Blinks. Lactard Blinks. Kosher Blinks. Liquid Blinks. You name it.”



FIGURE 2. Basic Blick's Entrée Forms

What's more, there's no *kitchen* at Blick's. All the meals are made by machines controlled by the customer, who can adjust the flavor mixes and food geometries to the decimal. “*All Blick Meals are created in a dazzling mechanical ballet, visible from both inside and outside the eating establishment. Watch the Blickum fly, squirt, and sizzle. You— the customer— are its only operator.*” The question is *which* flavor elements are included in the machines, and at what order of complexity. Would they be as complex as “Hamburger and Fries,” a bit more elemental like “Smoke” and “Citrus” or be expressed, as they are in Raspet's work, only by their chemical names? Whatever the case, I imagined customers being able to save and swap their favorites on chips, cards, or apps, under names like “Mom Fave Breakfast.” Modular tastes created, literally, in modules.

The beverage machines are no different. Customers are welcome to “*work the dials of the Soda Control Panel and finally mix down your flavors, sweetness, ice, temperature, and carbonation with scientific precision.*” Instead of mixing signature “suicides” from prebundled flavors like Pepsi, Gatorade, and horchata (I frequently enjoy a *thé brandonné* consisting of Dr. Pepper and unsweetened tea, or a *café brandonné* of Pepsi and coffee), customers can compose from elements, then name and swap compositions with friends, just like the meals. The elements can be challenging, like Raspet's gasoline-flavored soda or the barf, dirt, and rotten milk flavored *Jelly Bellies*, and with the flavors totally at their discretion, a customer might realize that adding just a *hint* of Tide Pod aroma synergizes other, wholly traditional flavors like celery or black tea. Customers may also re-create wholly traditional flavors and aromas, honing their recipes for “caesar salad,” “milk,” and “beef stroganoff” with every visit.

Originally, the Blick's food dispensers were basically 3-D food printers (which are now a reality), controlled by customers from behind plexiglass panels. However, there's no reason Blick's couldn't house an entire ensemble of diverse machines, together producing a wide variety of entres: cubes, shakes, space pasta, edible self-portraits, and so forth. Without a kitchen or counter to speak of, Blick's might resemble something like a video arcade— only with more space to dine and socialize, much like a Chucky Cheese. Thus, Blick's not only quickens and unbottlenecks food production, it all but eliminates waiting in line to order and pay. It is, then, doubly-fast food. Even waste is considerably reduced: 100% of the containers and utensils dissolve into an edible paste upon contact with Blick's signature condiment, *Birthday Sauce*. Time saved could then be spent enjoying Blick's experimental seating geometries, which would offer both enclosed, private booths and open, socially-kinetic designs— combining the spatial

logics of Japanese capsule hotels, around the periphery, with Arakawa and Gins' *Bioscleave House*, toward the center. *"The playground at Blick's is for Adults Only. Children must dine in a glass-encased vestibule and talk about home renovation and groupings. Pets eat free."*



FIGURE 3. Blick's Soda Control Panel

By a model that would no doubt be lifted and ruthlessly exploited by larger chain operations, even the taste-research is 2.0ed out to the customers themselves. The mission of an establishment like Blick's would be to beat larger chain operations to the punch with an open, equitable, and easily-imitated prototype, setting a new precedent. For instance, all the ingredients and measurements would be listed, open, and once created, could be shared then "liked" and reviewed by others on different public forums. Flavor fan groups could coalesce— "The Sour Patch



FIGURE 4. The Food Selfie Dispenser

Kids," "INXS," "The Gloucester County Farmer Food Fan Club"— according to preferences, whose chatter could generate a language so often lacking for flavors and aromas, especially weird, non-mimetic ones. In contrast to most restaurants, Blick's— and all the discourses in its orbit— would become a site of cultural production for the chemical senses, rather than the mere affectation of "culture." Blick's, and the Food Spiral blog itself, present a challenge to gastronomical culture. Here, to wit, were the opening lines:

"With all the different bars and fabulous restaurants to be found all over the world, wouldn't it be great if you could put them all in one place and burn them to the ground? Food Spiral is a food blog for the rest of us, or at least a food blog for whoever's left: for the daredevils, the freeze-dried space-food aficionados, the human goats, the bricoleurs, the sturdy, the creepers, the trick-or-treaters, the sidewalk bistro griefers, the soda fiends, the gas station gourmands— for indeed ev-

everybody committed to a new Food Transcendence. We know where you live. Taste the Rainbow....Food Spiral encourages an exploratory connoisseurship freed of all the annoyances and aristocratic encodings of most culinary discourse. In our weekly reviews, Food Spiral will entice our readers with exciting new products, travesties, recipes, hate mail, hot tips, and recommendations on some of the more interesting purveyors of low-quality food items. By way of an induced hysterics, we hope to also overcome some of our own inconsistencies and limitations, and open up a path that might lead us beyond both fodder and haute cuisine."

What, after all, is the function of a restaurant? Is it only a place to eat and chat? Isn't it as much, for cities eager for "renewal," a cipher and supplantation of actual cultural production? Isn't it also, for many of its diners, a way to smuggle in various forms of class distinction and bogus sophistication? Stroll the avenue of your local "arts district," and observe that apex of the modern grown-up experience: fine-dining in comfortable outdoor seating. What are we to make of any connoisseurship so easily mappable onto socioeconomic status? Culinary discourses embroider themselves with what Chinen calls "*ethically decorative titles such as organic, Farm-to-Table and artisanal, evolving in the branding of traditional food production,*" while as she laments "*these solutions are unscalable, good for some with the branding of being for the greater good.*" More than this, the solutions are often intentionally unscalable, used to enforce what Thorstein Veblen calls "invidious distinctions." The price of a thousand dollar wine is not a scalability issue. Nor is a two hundred dollar entrée or an eight dollar bottle of water. They're Giffen goods, their value indexed to their exclusivity. Likewise, many of the praises for "healthier options" are, yet again, cloaked addresses to the bodily habits of the unprivileged classes.

Blick's on the other hand, "*is an economically progressive fast food establishment. The Basic Blick Meal is only One Dollar and has the same nutritional value as the Middling-Blick, Über-Blick and Blick Papal Platter, which are only distinguishable by their higher complexity of shape, packaging, and taste sensation.*" First everyone eats; only then may better-off splurge on inessentials. As for the extra-gustatory, Blick's mandate would be to help invert the relation of cost and culture, for as Thomas Jefferson wrote: "*If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea.*" Blick's would even do its part in bringing the classics to the provinces. "*Not only do Blick wrappers come in a panoply of beautiful forms and eye-catching colors, every wrapper, cup, and implement is inscribed with medium-to-extralarge passages from canonical literary and philosophical works. Sit, eat and think. Or, engage your unwilling dining partner with*

bitesize bits of Hölderlin, Rabelais, Spinoza, Adorno, Quevedo, Bakhtin, Li Po— and nearly any name in the world library. Also: receive a free hard copy of your favorite Blick Classic with every tenth Blick meal." On site would be a wifi-library— working in partnership with the local public library— for downloading epub's and pdf's onto your phone or Blick's provided, spill-proof phablet. Fast food patrons will eventually come to scoff at fine-diners— for their "gluttony," their "wastefulness," their choice of appetite over spirit.



FIGURE 5. Blick's Classics Editions, vol. 8 (Hölderlin)

Needless to say, despite any demand-side packaging, low prices are certainly no indicator of progressive supply-side business practices. And Blick's zero-kitchen, customer-driven, food-dispensing model could cause a "disruption" of the worst kind— that is to say, the usual kind, in which all the benefits of an innovation or extractive business model disproportionately siphon to —preneurs and investors. How could Blick's— or any establishment like Blick's— avoid this fate? How could its multi-tiered combination of labor-saving, flavor-making innovations equitably benefit both the workforce and general public, outside of their roles as customers? Blick's could, of course, promote a good workplace culture; there would still be on-site employees at Blick's after all, just as there are in arcades, libraries, and parking garages. Their duties would include: adjusting and refilling machines, locating fles and offering recommendations, adjudicating disputes between customers, and making sure teens don't fux with the machines (which we can all agree would be pretty tempting). Employees could retain the leisured air of lifeguards, rather than the servility and strained affect of most fast food workers, and instead of uniforms, employees would be recognizable only by the signature Blick's Bling shown in Figure 6.



FIGURE 6. “The only Blick’s employees on hand are simply there to help guide discussion, propagate friendly yet appropriately chill vibrations, and assist in case of questions, maintenance, or criminal activity. If you need assistance, you can always spot one of our Big Time Operators by their distinctive sunglasses.”

system— depend entirely on labor to bargain access to resources. It really makes one stop and wonder how pundits actually imagine the obsolescence of labor translating into an equitable near-future.

This is the value of “asymptotic” thinking, taking a tendency to its absolute, then speculating about how the world— the *real* world— would respond. It’s also what I meant by an “induced hysterics,” teasing out implication through caricature. For Blick’s, this means: pan-nutritional and hylomorphic cuisine, willfully inverted taste-matrices, freestyle non-mimetic flavor creation, edible containers and utensils, and automated or customer-driven food production processes. These innovations *could* vastly improve the world, but as continuous as they are with the anti-labor, deskilling techniques of fast food giants and the extractive *dispositifs* of Silicon Valley, they probably wouldn’t. There’s no framework in place for equitably distributing the benefits of a totalizing innovation, and so a big part of Blick’s “involution” would require either supplying or demanding the right framework for its devices and delicious-yet-economical entrée-forms.

The workplace is only the shortest radius of “disruption,” however. The bigger, better, harder question is how innovations reconfigure social being? “Innovators,” “—preneurs,” and techno-utopians love to establish that a world-disclosing or laborsaving innovation *could* create greater leisure, autonomy, and shared power, without explaining if and how it actually *will*. This is the great bait-and-switch of innovation speak. Every innovation could result in greater leisure, autonomy, and shared power, but they rarely do, because of the economic and sociopolitical framework in which they unfold. Take, for instance, the mid-century promise of total automation, by which machines were to one day liberate humankind from socially necessary drudgery. To this day, in publications like *The Guardian* or *The Atlantic*, you’ll still read the gallingly nave idea that the reduction of the workweek is primarily a technological issue rather than sociopolitical or economic one. We already have the technological means to drastically slash the workweek; socially, we have chosen otherwise, particularly in the United States. Europe was a bit more eager to turn post-war prosperity— *les Trentes Glorieuses*— into more leisure, autonomy, and shared power. The United States opted instead to increase its consumption and competitive advantage— that is, to gain power *over* rather than shared power *to*. If total automation were to magically become a technical fact overnight, benefits would only funnel to inventors and investors. Former members of the workforce would become slaves or living ornaments, deprived of the livelihoods which— in our current social and economic