



JOHN STONES

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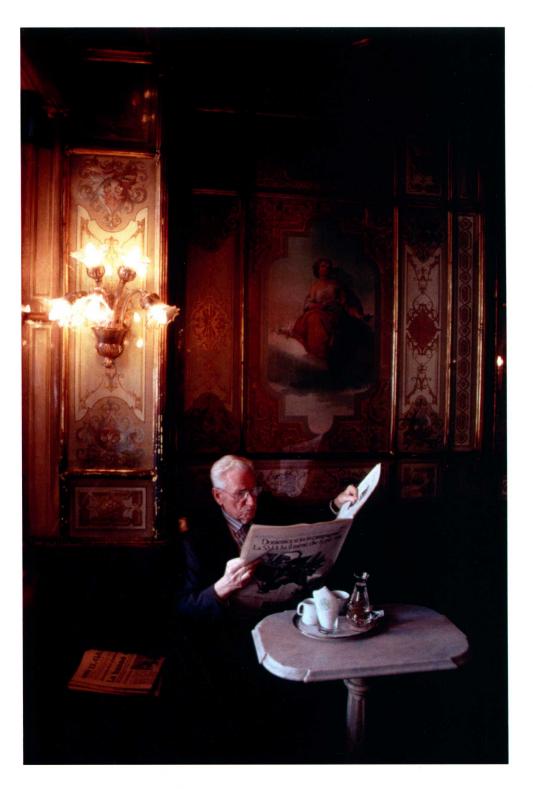
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INTRODUCTION





Previous pages:
Left: an elderly gentleman reads a
newspaper in the sumptuous and
historic Caffè Florian in Piazza
San Marco, Venice. Right: a young
Russian captured in 1992 by
renowned photographer Martin
Parr, eating fast food in the recently
opened McDonald's restaurant.

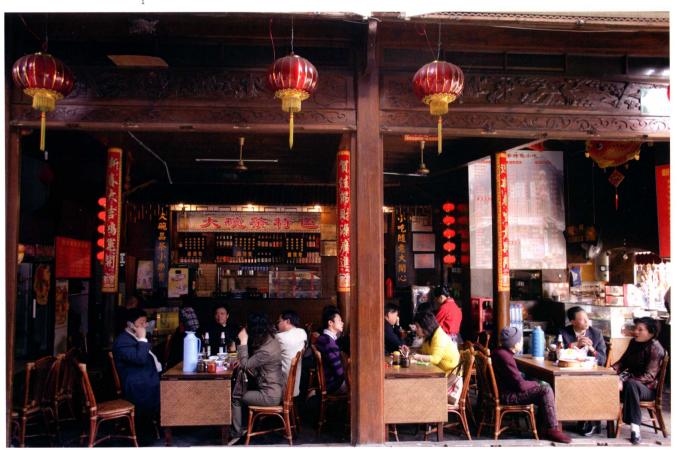
- 1 There are few more distinctive and carefully designed national dishes than the Japanese bento, or lunch box. Shown here is the Shokado square format that originated in Kyoto.
- 2 A traditional street café in the historic city of Hangzhou in China, 100 miles southwest of Shanghai.



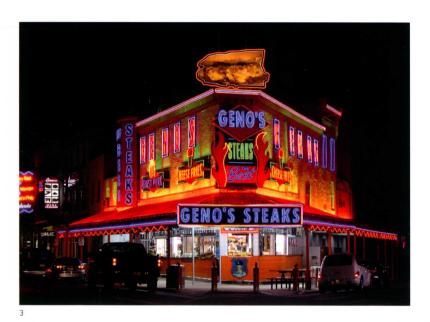
A YOUNG RUSSIAN TUCKS into a Big Mac that promises a first taste of American consumerism, with its squeaky plastic packaging and brash graphics. Meanwhile an elderly man whiles away the day with a newspaper in the genteel surroundings of the 18th century Caffè Florian in Venice. These are the two ends of a continuum in which the cafés and small restaurants of this book are to be found.

Small cafés and restaurants have a rich cultural history – evocative not only of particular cultures but of particular moments in time, whether it be 1950s America or fin-de-siècle Vienna. They are important spaces that frame social rituals, where the presence of food can seem almost incidental; they are places to hang out, whether for bored teenagers, Parisian intellectuals, busy mums taking a break from shopping, office workers on their lunch hour or the kind of solitary figure painted by Edward Hopper.

Few things define our respective national identities as much as the way in which we snack. Venues such as tea houses, sausage stands, espresso bars, fish and chip shops and coffee houses are intimately tied up with their countries of origin. This is even more evident when it comes to the food itself: bento, hotdogs, hamburgers, pizza, pommes frites,



- 3 The American diner has historically exploited nighttime lighting for maximum visual and advertising impact, as in this particularly garish contemporary steak restaurant in Philadelphia.
- 4 The Café Hawelka, designed by a student of Adolf Loos, photographed in 1990. It is quintessential Vienna, with smoke stained walls and Thonet bent wood furniture creating a cosy atmosphere.



falafel, kebabs, tapas, sandwiches, churros, tacos, sushi, croque-monsieur – the list is almost endless.

There is a customary distinction between high- and low-brow eateries, with places like Venice's Caffè Florian or the Café Schwarzenberg in Vienna featuring somewhere near the top and fast food joints such as MacDonald's being somewhere near the bottom. These are distinctions based on social prestige, quality of food and so on, and are not the concern of this book. Both kinds of venue offer informal food in a social environment, and their design brief is conceptually similar. The extensive and convincing critiques of 'junk food' (and the growing support for 'slow food') are, of course, important, but the moral and health differences between a calorie-laden slice of gateau with coffee that has been sourced for taste rather than ethics in a prestigious coffee house and a quick burger and fries in a chain burger bar may be moot. Similarly, the quality of the design of the venues may not be so very different.

When it comes to the design of fast food restaurants and cafés, it is often the view that retro is good, and contemporary is bad. The extravagant, streamlined forms, neon lights and shiny surfaces of American fast food





- 5 A riot of fast food brands competing for attention at the entrance to a mall in Las Vegas.
- 6 The evocative golden arches of a vintage McDonald's in Lexington, Kentucky, photographed in 1981.



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restaurants of the mid 20th century are the subject of countless homages, in film, photography and pop videos. The tackiness of the English 'greasy spoon' – the cheap café serving simple 'greasy' food – is now fetishised and savoured, for example in the work of Martin Parr, a photographer who has put particular care into documenting fast food. Food snobbism – with or without the social and environmental critique that has build up around fast food – has tended to blind people to the significant and wide ranging design sophistication that goes with the average fast food outlet. From the presentation of the food itself to the crockery, from the graphics to the interior, everything is given very careful consideration.

It is significant that one of the most comprehensive and widely read critiques of fast food, Eric Schlosser's Fast Food Nation, first published in 2001, is careful not to dismiss the aesthetics and design of the emerging chains but to describe their power. Recounting the way in which McDonald's established its unified face to the world in the 1960s, tearing down the original restaurants put in place by founders Richard and Maurice McDonald (who had originally worked as film set builders before branching out into fast food),

Schlosser writes:

'The distinctive architecture of each chain became its packaging, as strictly protected by copyright laws as the designs on a box of soap. The McDonald's Corporation led the way in the standardization of America's retail environments, rigorously controlling the appearance of its restaurants inside and out.'

From traditional coffee house to hamburger joints, informal eateries conceal a fascinating yet little acknowledged archaeology of the present. Often the national identity of a food or environment involves a complex game of transplantation – the 'hamburger' or 'frankfurter' in the USA, the Viennese café serving 'Turkish' coffee and the Tandoori restaurant in Britain all point to different cultures and yet also manage to seem intrinsic to their new home. New foods are introduced, often by immigrants, and a particular stylized environment then evolves, melding aspects of the new and old that packages up a taster of another culture.

As such, small cafés and restaurants are some of the most eloquent expressions of a continual process of cultural