"Taste of your Hometown": Evoking Nostalgia through the Diner Space in *Midnight Diner*

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Abstract

Restaurant spaces are seen as a space that intersects between the personal and the cultural. This paper looks at a Japanese TV series, *Midnight Diner*, an adaptation of a Manga by Yaro Abe, where a tiny, not-so-popular restaurant in one of the back lanes in Tokyo serves food from midnight to 7 a.m. This show makes several meaningful connections between food, memory, and space as the customers come with specific food cravings, and the Master (the owner-chef of the Diner) is happy to customize. The diner space transcends the traditional meaning of a diner that not only serves food to satiate hunger but is an experience that evokes nostalgia—for their home and their loved ones. The wistfulness in the lives of the customers for their home, people, and home-cooked food finds a release in the diner. The space of the diner acquires different meanings, as do the dishes the customer relishes. Thus, the paper explores the diner space as a symbolic space where each episode introduces a new character, a new story, and the past they deal with while the food is prepared and consumed on screen. The taste, smell, texture, and ingredients of the food in this diner stimulate the senses, and this space acquires emotional meaning for everyone stepping in.

Keywords: Japanese Manga, Midnight Diner, Space, Memory, Nostalgia, Food

Introduction

Food conjures up memories of the past and provides a certain comfort and emotional support in a world where everyone is battling emotions of past and present. It makes us reminisce about the people who may no longer be with us, the time that has gone by, and the places that we have been associated with in the past. Food evokes such strong nostalgia as all our senses are engaged while we are cooking and eating. There is a performative quality that can be ascribed to food, which in turn conjures up both social and personal memories (Gimblett 22). In 2008, Jon D. Holtzman emphasized the need to pay attention to the relationship between food and

memory, and to note how familiarity is involved in both these activities (363). As Cresswell posits in 2004, memory and place are intertwined. Memory is both personal and social (85). Places, too, hold different meanings for different people, reminding them of different situations and experiences they have had. Food memories construct and reconstruct past lived experiences, times that are stored in our minds, and moments that can be felt even when one is temporally and spatially removed.

Grandma's special recipes, the peculiar taste of dishes served in the hometown or in the particular community, and the special spread during rituals and traditions— all make us think of the life we have had. Engagement with food channels all our senses in remembering a remote past or a loved one with whom the comfort of a meal was once shared as it "integrates multiple sensory modalities" (Reid et al. 3). Every dish conjures up different cultural, social, and personal memories. The gastro-nostalgia, where nostalgia is evoked through food, "re-creates a cultural utopia" where people find solace in people and places from their past (Srinivas 212). With the focus on the creation of a symbolic space in a restaurant through gustatory nostalgia, this paper studies a curious intersection of food, memory, and space as "self-identity and place-identity are woven through webs of consumption" (Bell and Valentine 3). According to Allen Shelton, "a restaurant is an organized experience using and transforming the raw objects of space, words, and tastes into a coded experience of social structures" (525). Using Shelton's conceptualization and Massey's 1995 idea that place is "a product of interrelations" (9), this paper aims to look at the diner space within the Japanese TV anthology series *The Midnight Diner*. The paper explores what this diner space means for the customers, and how nostalgia evoked through food leads to the forming of that space within the series.

Gourmet Manga

In 2013, when Japanese cuisine was recognized as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, it underscored Japan's prominent food culture (Cang 491). It is reflected in the emphasis given to ingredients and food in everyday life, the rising number of Michelin-starred restaurants in Japan, and the popularity of Japan's food culture across the globe. Owing to its flourishing period in the 1980s, the country saw a major increase in food consumption patterns, which were responsible for a Gourmet Boom in Japan (Ashkenazi and Jacob 26). This boom in food consumption is ultimately reflected in the production of *Gurume* (Gourmet) manga which is seen as a "cradle-to-grave phenomena" for people in Japan (Aoki par.2) and where the urban cities are depicted as "centres for consumption" (Bell and Valentine 143).

Manga, the Japanese comic books, are widely read and circulated within and outside the country. They cover various aspects of life—sports, love, slice-of-life, romance, food—and are made for different age groups. Food manga for instance, is generally written for adult men, where the protagonist is usually a man who takes charge of the professional space within the comics (Brau 111). Within manga, the act of preparing and consuming food comes alive through all the movements and "takes on the drama of a sword fight" (Brau 113). Just like the pictorial Japanese language, manga—a comic book—has an element of visual storytelling attached to it; the comics not only describe the recipes in the narrative but the use of onomatopoeic language in the comics has cinematically inspired manga artists (Ashkenazi and Jacob 21). It enriches life experiences, lets the reader introspect, and has "much to say about life as novels or films" (Schodt 16). Therefore, lately, many of the comics have been adapted into live-action drama series like *Kantaro: The Travelling Sweet Tooth Salaryman* (2017), *Samurai Gourmet* (2017), *Solitary Gourmet* (2012), *Midnight Diner* (2009), and many others which have been serialized into anime. These adaptations, similar to comics, maintain the onomatopoeia in these shows showcasing the therapeutic and restorative quality of cooking

and eating. As Beriss echoes, restaurant space reflects and shapes “the character of neighborhoods or even the reputation of whole cities and regions” (3). These shows, thus, present the restaurant culture across Japan to the viewers and the engagement with Japanese cuisine which introduces not only its love for food but also for the emotional fulfillment it renders.

The popularity of gourmet manga has placed Japan’s culinary identity at the center of the world. Earlier explorations on food have highlighted the significance of food in our lives and how it is an important identity marker. Studying the significance of place has made scholars focus their attention on reading the metaphorical aspect behind it, places being “unbody like entities as thoughts and memories" (Casey 25). As De-Nardi suggests, “whether positive or negative, then, memories are powerful and complex forces linking experiences, emotions, places, and things” (2). However, as mentioned earlier, there have been fewer studies on the intersections of all three. Thus, this paper deals with one such manga adapted into a live-action drama called *Midnight Diner* (2009), which combines these aspects of Food, Memory, and Place. The paper explores how the three essentially become profound “emotional territories" within the diner space mentioned in the show (Kahn 168). This argument is further drawn from Bell and Valentine’s 1997 opinion of restaurants providing “consumption experiences that are as much about identity –of places and people – as they are about the serving and consuming of food” (8).

Midnight Diner

The paper explores the Japanese series directed by Joji, which aired over five seasons from 2009 to 2014. The first three seasons kept the original title *Midnight Diner* while the last two seasons were produced by Netflix Japan as *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Series*. It is an adaptation of a Japanese Seinen Manga, *Shinya Shokudo*, which, when literally translated, means *Midnight*

Diner, curated by Yaro Abe. At the heart of the show is the Diner and the owner of the Diner known as Master. At the beginning of every episode, the master claims, "When people finish their day and hurry home, my day starts" (*Fried Eggs and Red Wieners* 2:00-2:30), establishing it as a different space than usual. Open from midnight to 7 a.m., this diner is situated in a back lane in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The way this diner operates is unlike other restaurants in the vicinity; here, customized orders of food are possible; customers can bring their ingredients and get the dish prepared. Shelton sees the menu of a restaurant as its "codification of experience" (513), which decides the engagement of the reader with the food and the restaurant. Though the menu in this diner is fixed with only three unchanged items—beer, pork soup, and sake—the master is open to making anything that the customer wishes if he has the ingredients in his kitchen. It contrasts with the Japanese dining tradition of *Omakase*, which means 'I'll leave it up to you,' where the customer leaves it to the chef to choose and decide the meal. It is usually a big affair in the pricey, elegant, and luxurious restaurants with elaborate ingredients readily available at the table. However, this diner is a modest establishment where people seek uncluttered and unpretentious meals on their tables. Usually, the standardized menus in regular restaurants homogenize the experience of the dishes; this diner, however, customizes and personalizes the experience of the customers both of the dish and the diner space (Curry Magazine qtd. in Buettner 882; Beriss 3). It gives a glimpse into the lives of the characters who visit the restaurant and order their favorite dishes; through their gustatory nostalgia (food-centered nostalgia), the viewers get an insight into the "deliciously unknowable" (Bourdain par. 4) life in Tokyo.

This diner, in contrast to other restaurants in the vicinity, becomes an extension of the "contemporary [urban] life, a mirror of ourselves, our culture, and our new geography" (Pillsbury 10-11) as it gives us space to reflect on ourselves. The food here creates a sense of

belongingness within the customers and the "memory of sounds and smells" (Tuan 159) contributes to the formation of this space. Contrary to what Delores Hayden (1995) suggested, the experiences of memory and how it (re)produces the meaning of place become essential to the study of this diner (18). The present article then probes into nostalgia and the capacity of food "to mobilize strong emotions" (Appadurai 494), and explores the diner space transforming into something much more meaningful for the customers.

Each episode of the series unfolds around one signature Japanese dish and a character whose story takes center stage within that episode. The most exciting part of the show is how food not only comes in the form of dishes that the characters eat and enjoy, but these dishes are a very important part of the narrative. The dish, sometimes, also reflects the qualities of the character or becomes an extension of the character's story. For instance, in one of the episodes, a murderer is caught after fifteen years only because of his favorite dish, chilled noodles. The dishes remind the customers of their childhood, past, and hometown.

The bustling life in Tokyo and "the processes of urbanization, which have impacted profoundly on culinary cultures, have created among many city populations a nostalgia for the countryside, and for the 'plain fare' associated with simple rural life" (Bell and Valentine 142). This can be witnessed through the series, and the camera work through the city shots. The beginning shots of the show display Tokyo city with its huge buildings, heavily lit markets, busy roads, and brimming traffic, and then the camera pans to the quiet, composed back lane where the Diner is located. Apart from the first few Tokyo city scenes, there is nothing extravagant about the Diner in the series, and yet, through its storytelling, it is extraordinary in its ordinariness. Most of the nights for the characters are uneventful, there being no purpose apart from having comfort food in the cozy environment of the Diner. Many customers come alone to the Diner, and the night takes shape for them afterward; sometimes, their purpose is

conjured up during the night while they are having their comfort meal prepared by the Master and having a casual conversation with others in the Diner. These others are acquaintances from the Diner—other regular customers or complete strangers. The night time spent in the Diner allows these characters to vent out their emotions, most acute during this time when they are alone, retiring from their workspaces. The timings of the Diner are odd, yet it gives a space to characters to unwind, away from the hustle-bustle of their day jobs and the ordinary existence that they feel living in big skyscrapers.

Past and Place through Food

Relationships and community building, bonding with people—all come from commensality, i.e., by sharing a meal with someone (Fischler 535). "Eating is both a personal and social act," but even if the pleasure or comfort of a meal is subjective, the experience is usually "undertaken in groups" (Brown et al. 206). However, this show presents a myriad of characters at the Diner who are either a) sitting alone immersed in nostalgia about their home and people from their past, b) sitting and having a casual yet heart-to-heart conversation with complete strangers, and maybe gaining a new perspective in the end, or c) sharing their problems and thoughts with the Master who in his typical role of an ideal bartender listens to all the banter, neither passing any judgment nor offering a resolution to any problem. If at all, he asks pertinent questions only for the character to introspect, and makes favorite dishes of the inconsolable ones. For instance, in S1E21, a character comes to the Diner after 8 years and orders her favorite minced meat cutlets, a dish that she used to eat at the Diner with her deceased husband. After mourning for 8 years, she visits the Diner, relishes the same dish, is filled with nostalgia for her husband, and becomes a regular again. In another instance, Mr. Toyama, a popular but dreaded food critic, lands up in the Diner one day and, after listening to a guitarist playing an old melody, is reminded of his childhood. He then becomes a regular customer of the Diner and, to the surprise of everyone, orders Butter Rice every time he visits. Every other customer is amazed to see the

famous food critic in the Diner for this simple dish as he would be treated with any possible pomp and fuss in any restaurant of his choice in Tokyo. But for him, too, the Diner is a safe haven of past memories; it then becomes that "generative space" that gives meaning to the customers and their midnight cravings (Lewis 6). It is no longer just any other eating place for its customers; it is a place that gives meaning to their cravings, emotions, and memories.

The Master or the narrator introduces each character and their background to the audience at the beginning, but does not reveal much about himself; he has a know-it-all smile on his face always; there is definitely a mystery behind that calm demeanor, and the mark on his face adds curiosity to the entire backstory that is not there. A close reading of the narrative, instead, focuses on the Diner space and what it means to the customers coming in. The narrator's character, just like the audience, has a subtle presence observing the stories of those coming in for a comforting meal. The absence of detail about the narrator's life and any biases that may come along with his story adds to the creation of a non-judgmental and accepting environment towards one and all. Also, the smaller amount of time devoted to the narrator's background allows for a deeper insight into the lives of the customers. Like the Diner space, the narrator is a constant figure providing them comfort and stability. The Diner is a small, cozy space where chairs surround the kitchen from the three sides, and the Master stands right in the center, surfing between the kitchen space, cooking the meals, and the dining area where he serves his customers. Being the show's protagonist, he is ingeniously put at the center of the Diner without any primary focus on his life and his role outside the diner. Notably, for the customers, the intimacy in this diner contrasts with the apathy and indifference of the skyscrapers and huge corporations they usually are a part of, and the impersonal experience they go through at other eating places in the town. The long, tiresome working hours are antithetical to the calmness of the Diner and the simplicity of the food served there. Customers

from all walks of life and professions—lawyers, teachers, bankers, manga artists, yakuza (gangsters), sex workers—are all regulars here. Everyone is equally welcome, irrespective of class, gender, or occupation. It does not further emphasise the traditional gender or class roles within the society in Japan, where a hierarchical relationship has existed, and certain genders and classes have predominated social life. Instead, the series revolves around the customers and their problems and how the Diner space becomes a refuge for them, where the narrator listens to everyone with equal patience, highlighting the significance of compassion and empathy. This space then becomes for everyone a remembrance of their past, family, childhood, and of their hometown, for most of them have shifted from different parts of countryside towns to make it big in Tokyo city. It is the same "paradox of cosmopolitanism" that Srinivas mentions in her work that memory and imagination become powerful when the "local becomes less significant, physically" (205) and the symbolic meanings take the attention. Therefore, it would be correct to see this Diner as a localized pocket of space within the larger globalized and daunting structure of Tokyo.

The Diner's space, set in stark contrast to Tokyo City, metaphorically mirrors the characters' hometowns. As customers dine, they reminisce about their loved ones and homes, influenced by the Diner's food practices and foodways, which evoke powerful memories. This space is created owing to the food practices and the foodways undertaken at the Diner and the memories conjured up through those. There is an inseparable relationship between consumption, space, and place. It requires us to look deeper into the processes of the production of space, how the spaces are socially produced, and how ways of being and practices impact this creation of space. Michael Goodman (2010) posits that "consumption tends to reconfigure space and place, often disrupting, undermining and displacing consumption activities that were once thought of being related to specific places." In this case, it is food and foodways that

render meaning to the space of the Diner as any place becomes relational— place and identity, place and memory, place and belongingness. These change over the period of time when there is a change in the sense of place as and when spaces are discovered, rediscovered, and reconfigured (6). The association of the customers with the dishes and the overall culinary experience they have in the diner is integral and intertwined with the meaning of the diner for them.

Memory has the power to create a 'sense of place' anywhere, a potential to render meaning to a place. According to Stephen Feld and Keith Basso, a sense of place refers to "'the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over" (11). While we acknowledge this construction of space by memories, it becomes essential to look at this creation as an individual process where we need to acknowledge the ambiguities as a part of this creation process. No single space means the same for everyone. Places are collectively shared and contested; their meanings are not static and constant; they are fluid, ever-becoming, and a "sphere of coexisting heterogeneity" (Massey 2005, 9). Places are not owned by everyone in the same way and are not remembered by everyone in the same way.

Similarly, food is "endlessly meaningful" (Counihan 6); every dish in the show conjures different memories for the customers at the Diner. Even customers from the same hometown relate to it in their unique ways. For instance, in S02E07, a customer says, "Remember the taste of your hometown? It is different for everyone. I'm from Sendei. If I could choose my last meal before I die, I'd choose pickled Napa cabbage on piping hot rice. When I first came to Tokyo, the pickled cabbage here just didn't taste right to me." But in their discussion, they also acknowledge that the available taste is 'authentic' for those born and bred in Tokyo. The cab driver claims to have tried most of the restaurants in Tokyo and still couldn't get his taste,

which he believes is due to some difference in the ingredients—a different salt or cabbage. He later declares that the pickled cabbage of the Diner came closest to that of his hometown, Miyaki. In S03E06, Marilyn remembers her mother preparing cabbage rolls out of guilt for leaving her daughter alone in the house during her visits to her boyfriend. Acknowledging that no one ever forgets the taste of home, the master in the show makes cabbage rolls for Marilyn using her mother's recipe; it acts as a time capsule for Marilyn. However, the impact of these memories and the nature of the experiences depends on the memories evoked by the dish. Hence, it becomes interesting to note what sort of a place this Diner begins to occupy in the lives of these characters, bringing them closest to the memories of their hometown and past.

Sensorial Culinary Experiences

With long, slow, and steady camera shots of vegetables being cut and food being prepared, this series provides a wholesome "multisensory experience of eating and drinking" (Spence 2) Human senses, active during an engagement with food, become "useful categories of sensuous experience" whether it is involvement through cooking or eating (Rodaway 25). Much of the background score in the show comes from the kitchen space. Brau analyzes the vocabulary used in Oishinbo, another manga comic, to bring these sounds to the fore:

> The ton ton ton of a knife chopping, the gu gu or gura gura of a stew simmering, the juu sizzle of hot broth poured over fried rice, the saku saku sound made when a character crunches into something crisp. Even the temperature and textures of the food are identified with their own mimetic effects. The word hoko is superimposed on a picture of a hot sweet potato (hoka hoka means hot; hoku hoku suggests the softness of a starchy food); when a sound effect is written into such an illustration, it almost seems as if the food is speaking for itself. (113)

The series focuses on the senses of touch, smell, and hearing to broaden the scope of experience and sensuous geographies, viewing "life as multisensual and multidimensional

situatedness in space and in relationship to places" (Rodaway 4). From the sound of the chopsticks being pulled apart by the customers to the sound of sizzling pans and simmering pots, all sounds add to the overall experience of watching *Midnight Diner*. The customers guess the dish prepared by smelling the aroma in the Diner. In S03E03, a young aspiring private investigator's ability to be a good investigator is decided by guessing the right dish by smelling it. The act of smelling and identifying the right dish is interrelated to the emotional and intellectual response of the detective. This echoes Sullivan and Gill's idea that "sight paints a picture of life, but sound, touch, taste, and smell are actually life itself" (181). It is visible from the characters eating, slurping, and enjoying their food with a strong expression of gratitude. The dishes prepared and served are in small portions, but a mindful attitude toward the ingredients is reflected.

Conclusion

Since the series is an adaptation from a Gourmet Manga, at the center of each episode is the preparation of the food that is served, and its step-by-step recipe; there are suggestions and cooking hacks at the end of the episode when the fourth wall is broken down by the characters who appear on screen to spell the recipe themselves. It is an enchanting way to display Japanese cuisine and its recipes simplistically. The viewer learns about Japanese culture through the show from the brightly lit streets of Tokyo to the cuisine, the tiny sake and beer glasses, the honor of pouring a drink for another, and the subtle head bow in gratitude for the food. The entire experience, both for the viewer and the character, seems meditative—with the cozy feeling of the diner along with the comfort food that the Master makes. The diner becomes a refuge for the characters who come back from their mundane lives and share their melancholy about who they have become and what they are doing in this big city of Tokyo, having left their family, home, and dreams in the past. It, therefore, becomes a confessional-like space for everyone.

Generally, a restaurant space is a space that comes with time and space constraints. This Diner, however, transcends those limitations and creates a timelessness for its customers. It does not dissociate them from their present; instead, it converges the temporal and spatial aspects to make them more self-aware, thus highlighting the strong connection between nostalgia evoked through food, which leads to the formation of personal space for the customers. This diner symbolically becomes a place where they feel closer to home and to themselves. The "cooked environment" (Shelton 525) seasoned with the warmth of nostalgia makes this diner and the series distinct from the usual hard and edgy restaurants and TV dramas, respectively. An understated background music and a calming atmosphere created by either cooking sounds or slurping sounds made by the customers resonate with the simplicity of the diner and the show. The soothing environment of this diner not only lets the customers and even the audience absorb the stories of the customers enjoying a humble meal but also gives them space to introspect. The consoling food evokes certain emotions and memories that bring solace in the present lives of the customers and improve their well-being. The sense of familiarity the dishes provide becomes a comforting reason to visit the diner, the only constant for many customers in this otherwise fast-paced changing world. In addition to celebrating eventful nights, they strengthen their emotional bonds and connections through quiet nights. The nighttime fused with the warmth of the food served in this diner gives everyone a space to process their stressful everyday lives in solitude and during meaningful interactions with others.

With its minimalist storytelling style and visuals, the show promotes inclusivity through the diner and depicts the cultural significance of food in Japanese culture. It ushers us through significant human values of compassion, sensitivity, and empathy towards others, where acceptance of other people turns the world into a comfortable place for everyone. The healing

and the growth that takes place within the characters in the show offer a need to cherish human connection. Thus, the midnight diner provides a safe haven for all its customers' emotions and lends a human experience to the visits to this diner where the human connections both of the past and the present have been shown to have an impact on one's life.

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