

MCDO: THE SOCIO CULTURAL IMPACT OF FAST FOOD ON PARISIAN DINING  
HABITS AND POP CULTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, France has defined the culinary arts for gourmets around the world. Indisputably its capital, Paris, today reigns as the Mecca for lovers of "haute cuisine" or "fine dining" worldwide. Be that as it may, over the past two decades a new phenomenon has taken the city of lights by storm. Names such as "McDonald's", "Quick", and "KFC" have literally invaded Paris and have become staples in the daily lives of Parisians. This, however, did not come easy. Along with a tradition of culinary arts is also a culture deeply entrenched in its sense of history and place in society. As expected, this traditionalistic society has been resistant to change, particularly to the winds of "Americanization" and "Globalization." For many French people there is an association that good food is French and fast food is American and bad, said Michel Crozier, a leading French sociologist (Greenhouse 14). Traditionally considered an aberration by the French, and by default Parisian standards, fast food has represented, at least for Americans, the practical solution to the emerging problem of two income families and latchkey kids. This does come at a price. One example in the US is the recent legal processes that have been opened against mega fast food chain McDonald's under allegations that their products have significantly contributed to obesity in children. McDonald's has denied the allegations and until today has successfully dismissed the suits in court.

Traditionalists and purists of the French culinary movement had predicted obesity would never become a problem in France in spite of the

growing number of working mothers and fathers at the turn of the last decade. However, today France is acknowledging a growing problem of obesity in their child population. The question in both the American and the French case is the same: Is fast food to blame? Ironically when compared to the US response to this issue, various analysts, and McDonald's France itself (as explained later in the paper), have argued that fast food may be a partial cause for this phenomenon. In spite of the general assertions about the nutritional value these companies profess, firms such as McDonald's continue to expand in Paris and France in general. What we see here is astonishing: Two Pop Cultures battling the same problem, but with significantly different approaches. Still the question remains: Considering the deeply entrenched culinary tradition of the French, what then, explains the huge success fast food companies have sustained since their inception in France, and specifically Paris?

This research attempts to analyze just how the phenomenon of fast food in France, and particularly Paris, evolved. The history of the fast food industry both in the US and in France will be separately and briefly analyzed. The analysis will then focus on the fast food industry in Paris. As culinary capital to France and the world, Paris holds the key to fully understanding the phenomenon of fast food in France and should help us arrive at some valid conclusions regarding its acceptance and repudiation by different segments of the French population. While it is inevitable to look at the most important players in the market<sup>1</sup>, the analysis will hinge mostly on the socio-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Because of its great influence worldwide in the fast food industry, and in Paris and France in General, McDonald's will serve as an example of numerous cultural issues throughout this paper.

elements of fast food in Paris. Key questions will be answered. Namely, what was the general reaction to the entrance of these restaurants to the city? What changed in French society over the years to allow the successful entrance of these restaurants? What is the public perception of these restaurants in Paris today? Are American fast food Restaurants taking over and eliminating Cafés in Paris? And most importantly, what does the future hold for the industry in this world class city?

### Why this study

The idea for this study came as a result of a debate in a French culture and civilization course. An article was presented in which it was reported that the percentage of obese children in Paris had dramatically increased over the last decade, but particularly over the last few years. An initial response from this researcher, and a rather impulsive one, was to conclude the causation was to be directly placed on the effects of the emergence of McDonald's and other American fast food restaurants as every day icons in the lives of Parisians. Needless to say, these statements became the subject of a heated discussion that raised more questions than answers. As basic as they may seem, the answers to these questions would definitely shed light into the evolution of an old and traditionalistic society. Were the French still narcissistic in their culinary expertise, or had they evolved into a cosmopolitan society that could easily adapt? This question also goes hand in hand with the bigger question regarding whether or not the French had managed to consciously or subconsciously endure or go through their own Americanization. Many peoples of the world, including the French, have

consistently claimed that the world has become too “Americanized” (Appendix A).

It is without a doubt not a surprise that the French have the reputation of being the perennial detractors of all things American. America has also been blamed for globalization as an alternative to closed markets. Globalization is an issue in America as it is, but in France it’s more a matter of culture than economics (Goodman A11). When it comes to food and culture, the French are extremely proud of their heritage. When purists were asked the question regarding fast food the reply was not astonishing: what could better exemplify the French identity than its cuisine, and what could better illustrate the evils of globalization than fast food (Sage 20).

As expected, speculation led to a number of different superfluous conclusions. This analysis aims at dispelling those myths, and to arrive at conclusions that should help us understand not only the fast food industry in Paris, but also the essence of the modern Paris, and a further understanding of where Pop Culture is headed in this great city. Why Paris? Paris alone is home to a full 33% of all fast food restaurants in France (Curtis).

## I – DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF FAST FOOD

### Fast food Defined vs. The Custom of being Served

Before we go any further, we must make a parenthesis to elaborate on the proper definition of “fast food.” What is fast food, really? There are a number of definitions out there that would give justice to the industry. However, in light of the focus of this paper, we will utilize the definition given by the Syndicat National pour L’Alimentation et la Restauration Rapide<sup>2</sup> (SNARR): In its own right, fast food distinguishes itself from other forms of restaurant service (i.e. traditional restaurants, cafeterias, cafes-restaurants) by two specific characteristics:

1. The absence of table service
2. The utilization of disposable plates and utensils

In France, under legal terms, the possibility to consume on site is not a criterion used to determine whether an establishment corresponds to fast food or not. Today, fast food restaurants represent 2.3% of the totality of restaurants in France (SNARR).

### History of fast food

From France & Europe to the US and back

While most of us would consider the birth of McDonald’s and the franchise model as the official “beginning” of American fast food as we know it today, known staples in this industry date back as early as 1800s. For instance, Thomas Jefferson brought the Parisian recipe for “*pommes frites*” for the first time to the US in 1802. In spite of this early adoption, French

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<sup>2</sup> National Union for Fast Food Establishments

fries did not become well known in the US until the 1920s (Schlosser 114). A similar story can be attributed to another fast food favorite, the hamburger. The hamburger is a traditional Russian food that was brought to Hamburg by German sailors visiting Baltic ports. Later on these sailors came to the US, settled in Cincinnati, and continued the consumption of this "Russian" delicacy (Fantasia 230).

Fast food as we know it today is the result of an evolutionary process in our eating habits as a species. In the beginning of time, as hunter-gatherers we went out into the field in wait for the prey that would eventually become dinner. As time and centuries went on and human beings became much more specialized, we turned to outdoor markets, and subsequently supermarkets to do the "hunting" for us. Still today, the essence of a home cooked meal is the product of a visit to the supermarket.

Perishables soon created the need for efficiency in preserving foods for longer periods of time, particularly in light of the changing seasons. With the discovery of salt this problem was temporarily solved. Soon thereafter we progressively became more sophisticated in our approach to preserving foods. It should not be any surprise then, that with the end of World War II, and the massive entrance of women into the workforce that followed, the need for more efficiency in food preparation sent minds spiraling into coming up with alternatives.

The solution became very simple. Restaurants evolved into diners, cafeterias, and early drive through or drive-in restaurants. The modern fast food restaurant became the next step toward more efficient food consumption (Ritzer 36). Fast food came into existence partially because of a

need to “eat on the run”, fulfilling a vital need while at the same time tending to the needs of society (i.e. work).

When speaking about the “business” of fast food, even before speaking about what could easily be called the “McDonald’s Effect”, we should consider how some people saw this as a primal opportunity to take advantage of the changing needs of society. One of these individuals was Carl Karcher, who in 1944 owned numerous hot dog carts in Los Angeles. He further expanded his business to include other types of restaurants including a Drive-in Barbecue spot (Schlosser 18).<sup>3</sup> What he never expected was to experience the dramatic changes that were to take place ten years later. This is when Richard and Maurice McDonald came into the scene.

### *The McDonald’s Effect*

It is thoroughly implausible to assume that fast food began with McDonald’s. After all, are we realistically expected to assume that those who started it perfected it? However, the phenomenon that began with diners and hot dog stands all over America would take on a new meaning with the concept created by the McDonald’s brothers.

The McDonald’s brothers began utilizing the same traditional methods used by other entrepreneurs in the fast food industry. However, one sociological ill threatened their business very much the same way it does today. Retention of personnel was a problem, and, among other things, they were tired of the level of waste that this type of business entailed. From dishes, to silverware, replacing items carried a heavy cost. Eventually they

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<sup>3</sup> More detail on how this venture came about can be found in pages 18-19 of fast food Nation

came up with a great solution: their famous assembly line method of preparing burgers that would revolutionize the industry.

Needless to say, the McDonald's brothers had a resounding success in the industry. So much that Ray Kroc, impressed by the efficiency of their operation, bought the McDonald's brothers out of the enterprise in 1955 (Ritzer 37). It would not be long before other known names in fast food would start to emerge (i.e. Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wendy's). This is the "American" story. The question still remains: How did this fad in American Pop culture make its way into the Parisian way of life?

## II - ENTER PARISIAN FAST FOOD

### The French Consumer

The French consumer is in fact the main subject in this study. Therefore, before going any further in the analysis, it is relevant and imperative to describe the French consumer in detail. It is the discriminate taste of the French that makes this study interesting. Here are some of the main characteristics and expectations they have regarding their dining experiences. It is easily noted that some are very similar to US expectations and needs. However, some differ significantly.

When we say the French are entrenched in their culinary tradition, it is an understatement. One memorable example is that of French President François Mitterrand. A president during a time which many described as one of opulence and luxury for the office, even near death he showed his pride for the French culinary tradition. When he finally told his doctor to stop the medication that was keeping him alive, he ordered a last feast that would have made the average Briton choke: two dozen oysters, capon in cream and then ortolan, the tiny, rare songbird that is roasted, served on a tray and then eaten whole, bones, beak, feathers and all - a spectacle so repellent (and illegal) that it traditionally takes place under a large linen napkin. Mitterrand ate three ortolans, and a week later he was dead (Macintyre).

The French president could have easily chosen a meal to represent the changing times such as fast food. Instead, he chose items that could be considered "patriotic." In effect, in his gesture he represented the "old school" of French dining enthusiasts. This type of French consumer will be forever a part of Parisian and French life.

Another example of the narcissistic tendencies of the French and their discriminate palate is how these tendencies could become the indirect cause of a man's death. Great chef Bernard Loiseau, 52, committed suicide in late February over his downgrade in the reputable Guide to French gastronomic palaces GaultMillau from 19/20 to 17/20. GaultMillau and Michelin are the "Bibles" of French cuisine for diners, and are sure bets to result in more or less patrons at any given time based on that particular year's ranking. A two point drop was not only devastating to him personally as an artist, but financially as well, as with each point lost discriminate patrons would also abandon his restaurant by the masses. The key point here is that the French palate is so discriminate as to strictly follow culinary guides to the letter regarding the best establishments for fine dining. A point lost is unacceptable, let alone two.

Modern French cooking is at the same time traditional and inventive. It is the reinterpretation of mostly robust and simply rustic dishes with the lessons of presentation and lightness learnt from nouvelle cuisine: an appreciation of ingredients at their best as well as a freedom to surprise. The French have too much to lose if they abandon their rich and varied cooking traditions - the most important legacy of a splendid civilization, and a link with their past. All the media attention around the crisis - not a day goes by without news of chefs and their exploits - and the fear of loss and globalization have created a new passion in gastronomy (Roden).

The discriminate taste of the French consumer manifests itself in more ways than through the self indulgent last wishes of a dying former president, or through the manic depressive tendencies of an artist. These deeply rooted

habits based on tradition begin early on in life. This is when French kids begin their "Palate" training. Many parents start training their children's palates -- giving them tastes of good adult food -- from babyhood. And from the age of 3, all children go to school full-time; where eating well is one of the key lessons they're taught. "In all these places [even in summer camps], there are dietitians, and the meals are balanced, with at least one warm serving, vegetables, fruits, etc.," says French sociologist Jeanne Fagnani. "So, the eating habits learned here from a very early age are very different from those in the U.S." (Peterson). This particular factoid raises deeper questions regarding today's success of "American" fast food in Paris and in France. If parents continued this "palate" tradition, how can we explain the success of what many have dubbed "la malbouffe."<sup>4</sup>

While the French are extremely traditionalistic and entrenched in their culinary heritage, they began changing their eating habits towards the mid 1960s. It is at this time that they truly began to see a need to "eat in a hurry" as they adapted to new patterns of societal norms and began experiencing fast food for the first time. This introduction into the world of fast food came at a price. On one side were the detractors: those who embarked on a vicious campaign to destroy the potential success of fast food companies in the US. On the other side, was the price the acceptance of fast food carried with it in Paris. The French could potentially accept fast food. However, quality and excellence had to be at the order of the day.

Quality and excellence took a hit with the recent arrival of Foot and Mouth and Mad Cow disease in Europe. While this was tragic in many ways, it

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<sup>4</sup> Junk food

also proved an opportunity to learn more about the discriminate taste of the French. Because of the disease debacle that erupted, the French, a people long committed to quality food and tradition, increasingly went organic as fears over these diseases, genetically-engineered produce and US-style fast-food raised new awareness about eating habits. During this time it was not surprising to see Health food stores popping up nationwide and most supermarkets having a "bio", or health food department featuring organic produce such as eggs, milk, pasta, olive oil, meat and even wine and oysters (Mcintyre). This shift in consumer behavior from the French is a clear example about how discriminate the French can be even about fast food. This also helps to explain why McDonald's France opened its doors to the media during this time to make visits to their kitchens to reassure their clientele they were being proactive regarding the potential dangers of these diseases.<sup>5</sup>

On a much more fundamental basis we have the issue of whether eating fast food is really having a meal. According to Claude Fischler, a specialist at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, and as someone who has taken the culture of food seriously for some years, even as the French walk and eat, they make a linguistic distinction in saying "I didn't have lunch today. I just ate something standing on the street. (Goodman A11)."

The labor union, besides giving us our definition of fast food, has also provided clear evidence of the expectations consumers have in visiting fast food establishments. Fore instance, proximity is expected. Thus, as in the

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Greenberg, former CEO of McDonald's Corporation at a presentation for the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania.

US, we also run into a repetition in the landscape of the same fast food signs reminding customers they are forever present. Proximity, however, has been taken too far in the view of many in the US. The example that is coined most often is that of fast food outlets located in hospitals. Debates over the health contributions of this type of cuisine have been endless particularly in light of the paradoxical point of view of big fast food companies.

The other expectation from customers is fast service. Habits in the French population have changed such that they do not enjoy spending too long waiting for a meal. The syndicate estimated that today the French take approximately 17 minutes for breakfast, 33 minutes for lunch, and 38 minutes for dinner. Time beforehand taken for lunch is now reduced significantly. In total, on any given day, the average French person is expected to spend around 88 minutes a day eating. While this is astonishing considering the previous French track record, the most interesting fact is that the current numbers compare to around 90 minutes per day per person on average in the US. This allows us to conclude that neither Americans, nor the French have the time to spare during the day to simply eat.

Evidently, in this juncture once again we must mention the relationship that exists between price and quality as a main, if not the most important, expectation of the French consumer. This becomes particularly important for the consumer that finds him/herself in a situation in which the regular café bar is not available. However, by fast food standards, the French are willing to pay a premium. Looking at the Big Mac Index, the metric that cross compares the price of a Big Mac across various nations in the world in an attempt to present purchasing power parity, it is obvious that the French

pay more than what consumers pay in the US. This does not end here, as consumers in France are willing to spend up to \$9 in food at a McDonald's, compared to between \$4 and \$6 by their American counterparts. Price and quality, hand in hand with standardization are definitely correlated with the level of the typical French consumption at an American fast food joint.

Finally, we have liberty and conviviality. Constraints in fast food restaurants are minimal. One can actually do what one would not dare at a formal restaurant, or at one's own or someone else's residence. It is also a place where children are welcome. Patrons of regular restaurants have complained that on many occasions, their children do not feel welcome. Fast food establishments are changing the landscape by becoming places where families can come and share together. McDonald's is a clear example. For instance, since the French are fond of Sunday family dinners, McDonald's has made a big pitch to families giving gifts to children on Sundays (Greenhouse 14).

When we speak about the French and their families, fast food establishments, but the bigger chains in particular, have taken family life into account in their marketing. While at least 50% of the current consumers of American fast food in Paris are less than 30 years of age, fast food restaurants have been tailored mainly to children. This is the case in the US as well. However, the restaurant is not entirely for the children. It is easily noted that the clientele varies as one enters one of these establishments. It all depends on the district in Paris where the restaurant is located. For instance, the clientele to visit a fast food outlet in La Defense region would more than likely be different than the person visiting an outlet close to the

movie theatres in Boulevard St. Germain. Restaurants also acknowledge that the consumption of their products in many cases is the result of a response to the *moment* of consumption. It all depends on the present need. A corporate executive at La Defense might be able to take a quick sandwich at a nearby outlet, but take his kids to McDonald's on Saturday to spend time with them.

In terms of the seasonal effects Paris fast food outlets encounter, the summer in particular has proven to be highly lucrative. Foreign families traveling together, or even single adults will be prone to take a meal on the run. In the case of the larger chains, they benefit greatly due to brand loyalty and equity. Especially when traveling, if a brand is well known, such as McDonald's, consumers are more likely to use the establishment as a safety net, especially when traveling with children. This proves especially beneficial when arriving for the first time in a foreign city. For the well known big chains, expectations are also great. The same quality of service that is found in one location is expected everywhere. This has been a great part of the success behind the franchising model. Today French diners comprise nearly 80% of the clientele at American Style restaurants (Richards).

### *Culture and History of French/Parisian Dining*

Sociologists and historians alike would undoubtedly abide by the principle that, for the French, food is an intricate part of who they are as a people and as a culture. From a historical standpoint, this has been an accepted assumption since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the year when the first "Almanach des Gourmandes", or almanac of gourmets (the guide to the

French culinary tradition at the time) was first published (Fantasia 202). This was only the beginning. The French, but namely Parisians have come to create their own reputation worldwide for their gastronomic habits. Jen Bernard, a Canadian enthusiast of French cuisine once described Parisians as “the ultimate bobos” (bourgeois bohemians) because they got into the habit of eating well when the chefs of the aristocracy were evicted during the revolution. This was precisely when the world’s first real restaurants opened (Fraser 10).

We have come a long way from that time. While we still relish examples regarding the culinary traditions in France such as the eccentricities of President Mitterrand, the reality of today reveals that for a number of years fine dining has been going through a crisis of sorts. The root of the crisis is not just economic - it is also social. According to Thierry Demanche, head of the Ecole de Cuisine Ferrandi, which is part of the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the rot started in the Sixties when women were liberated, went out to work, and gave up on cooking. Children ate in school canteens and in the fast food establishments that drove out the old neighborhood bistros, and at home were given tinned or frozen foods. A whole generation grew up without the memory of good home cooking or what good ingredients taste like. For this generation food is no longer the primary source of pleasure (Roden). These statements are just confirmed by the culinary stars of our day. Society has changed both in composition and in its needs of the palate. Alain Ducasse, great French chef and the only thus far to have earned six Michelin stars for two different restaurants, said it best when he explained that “taste” relies on memory. He is worried about the

French palate of the future as people are eating faster and faster. There is no time to develop memories of the tastes and flavors in the mouth (Platt 184). Fast food has inevitably forced the French to further move in this direction. While the government has been listening through the creation of schools that offer courses for children in the recognition of tastes, it is obvious that fast food has created an indelible imprint in the social landscape of Parisian culture.

### *The History of "French" fast food*

Looking at the phenomenon of fast food and French culture, at least at first glance, there are a series of paradoxes to be analyzed. First is the entire concept of preparing, serving, and eating meals quickly. From the beginning this has been a source of debate regarding the potential success of fast foods particularly during the early years. It is especially controversial precisely because of the franchising model. The French up to that time were not used to getting the same product prepared the exact same way anywhere they went. They were also intrinsically opposed to receiving this type of service. This would be a challenge to overcome, particularly by the American giant companies.

The first type of fast food restaurants in Paris was really the "Bistro." The term itself is derived from Russian bistroi meaning "fast" (Fantasia 220)." This in itself is a testament to the changing attitudes of French society towards the turn of the century regarding their previous eating habits. Despite the name, bistros never became places where fast food was served. It simply became the point of compromise between the full-fledged

restaurant and the café. The question still remains: Was there a “French” fast food before the entrance of the American giants?

Arriving today as a tourist in Paris, alongside the bistros and the cafes, one easily finds other quicker sources of nourishment. No, not McDonald’s! We can easily find the “French” version of fast food everywhere. We can easily run into vendors selling crepes, or merquez sausages (Fantasia 220). In other places we could easily fall victim to the temptation of a “viennoiserie”, where we could easily eat in, or walk away with our fast “sandwich en baguette jambon beurre” (Butter and ham in a baguette). The conclusion then is that the French have in their own right created their own market for fast food. So, why is this not considered in the same light as the McDonald’s and the Burger Kings of the world?

In 1976 French companies began to create their own fast food products, mostly sandwiches on baguette. Viennoiseries were considered fast food outlets because they conformed to the industry’s definition of fast food (definition taken from the SNARR and described earlier in the paper) as packaged foods, sold at the counter at low prices that can be consumed in place or taken away. This definition does not include two main things: the standardized nature of the industry, at least by US principles, and the chain structure (i.e. the franchising model). Further studies, like an analysis of the image of fast food suggests that viennoiseries are in the minds of consumers when selecting a quick meal, but that they did not constitute the same concept as fast food (Fantasia 207).

As with anything French, it is fair to assume there is a bit of controversy as to the exact date the French fell victims to the phenomenon

of "American fast food." The first traces on the canvas of the fast food industry in France date to the entrance of McDonald's in Paris as early as 1972 (Fanstasia 206) McDonald's later entered Strasbourg on September 17, 1979. Information from other sources dates the first. One of the main trends is that McDonald's takes the lead in emerging markets for fast food in France. Other firms followed. McDonald's has now over 900 restaurants with 35,000 employees throughout France. There are currently 49 McDonald's in the Paris Region (Approximately 20% of the French Restaurants). One of its main competitors, Quick Restaurants of Belgium, had approximately over 430 restaurants throughout France by the end of 2001. Quick was the undisputed leader until the turn of the nineties. Quick even managed to buy out the chain O'Kitch, a chain created by Raymond Dayan, the disgruntled former McDonald's franchisee who lost his contract due to his lack of vision to upkeep the "McDonald's way". He created the O'Kitch brand to stay in the fast food industry (Curtis). In a very general sense, the trend has been for the American-based companies developing and continuing to dominate in spite of the entry of many European competitors into the market (Fanstasia 206).

#### *Other Players in The French/Parisian Market*

From the comments above, it is easy to see there is a clear distinction between American fast food and French fast food. Moreover, because of this fact we should also expect McDonald's is not alone in Paris. There are many other companies that have also claimed participation in the French capital as fast food outlets. Granted, these companies are not able to compete at the

high level of McDonald's, however, they are members of the French Union for Fast Food Restaurants, a group of companies that have created a "French" identity to a traditionally American industry. Here is a list of adherents:

FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS IN PARIS
Air Coucous
L'As du Fallafel
Aux Pains Perdus
Be Boulangepicier
Brasero
Café Muffin
Columbus Café
Deni's Delices
Domino's Pizza
Haagen-Dazs
Horse Power Restauration
Kentucky Fried Chicken
La Brioche Doree
Le Damier Gourmand
Les Restaurants a la Carte
Lina's Sandwiches
McDonald's
Mister Good Fast
Nils
Pomme de Pain
Presto Caffé
Quick Hamburger
Shogun Sushi
So'Fast
Sorest Montmartre
West Side Café

The appearance of local French fast food outlets has done nothing but complicate the landscape of the industry in Paris by reviving the perennial question of what really constitutes fast food. However, the appearance of other American fast food brands does lead one to believe we should look into the future of fast food in Paris as overwhelmingly positive. On the Champs Elysées we can now see the Chicago Pizza Pie Factory and Cactus Charlie's Tex-Mex. How have these chains managed to be successful in Paris? The Paris market has explosive potential because of a large middle class clientele – especially families – seeking restaurants midway between fast-food joints and formal, high-end establishments. The French are flocking to such American mainstays as Friday's, Chi-chi's and the Chicago Pizza Pie Factory –

places where parents can eat their food on a plate and children can color the tablecloths (Richards).

*The Union : Syndicat National de l'Alimentation et la Restauration Rapide (SNARR)*

Labor unions have been a fixture in the daily lives of Parisians for years. True to form and to French tradition, fast food restaurants have a labor union that looks after the needs and rights of fast food restaurants. The fact that fast food has a union in France is also a clear testament to the fact that fast food has become a part of French culture in more ways than one. Both French and American companies are members of this organization.

The "Syndicat National de L'Alimentation et la Restauration Rapide" (SNARR) describes itself as responsible for a dynamic segment in the French economy and a source of employment; an organization in charge of an industry whose mission has been an adapted response to the changing lifestyles of the French population; a professional sector in charge of giving opportunities to young people; a platform for the development of local agricultural economies; a demanding career based on hygiene and quality.

The union is very much in touch with the French consumer and the evolution of its taste when it comes to dining. They have acknowledged that over the past 20 years, the nutritional behavior of the French consumer has changed dramatically. For instance, the number of meals consumed outside the home has increased over the years. Partly responsible is the increasing responsibilities of women in the workforce. Another result of this increase is that the French consumer has become much more demanding of the quality

it receives even in fast food. Fast food was developed in great part because of a tendency rooted in these changes.

### **III. MODERN PARISIAN POP CULTURE AND FAST FOOD**

#### *The "Americain" Effect*

Making a clear distinction between "French" and "American" fast food is a great segue way into fully analyzing the cultural phenomenon of fast food in Paris. According to Eric Schlosser in his book "Fast Food Nation", fast food has joined Hollywood movies, blue jeans, and pop music as one of America's prominent cultural exports (10). The Reality for the French in this regard, at least traditionally, has been to reject anything American as "uncivilized." America and its level of supremacy and influence on the world reiterated, above all, the desire of the French to be proud of their heritage, and resist by all means necessary all the negative influences from the US. This, considering the tradition within the culinary arts, included fast food. The subject has even been the subject of discussion among politicians. Jack Lang, former Minister of Culture once spoke passionately about the subject. In 1989 upon the formation of the National Council of Culinary Arts, an organization charged with protecting the French culinary patrimony, when speaking about the Council's creation being a direct reaction to the fast food phenomenon, he retorted he was "no fan" of hamburgers (Fantasia 203). Others have been less critical, but nonetheless, have expressed their disdain for the American incursion of fast food in Paris and France in general.

When speaking about the "Americain" effect, it is easy to associate it solely with fast food. However, digging deeper to uncover the roots of other relevant issues, it is evident that American influence has further reached across the aisle. If we look at the influence of American business, particularly

over the last decade, it is clear that the American style has permeated the way business is done in Europe. Speaking specifically regarding the phenomenon in Paris, American companies are now more than ever setting up subsidiaries in this major European capital. The result is not only an influx of American businesses and expatriates, the result is also a transfer in the lifestyle prevalent in the various professions. As a result, as in the US, the need to eat on the run has taken over, and as such, Parisians are concentrating less on having the traditional two to three hour lunches. American firms have, in fact, made an effort to adapt to their host country environments<sup>6</sup>, however, they too have brought with them un-negotiable traits. This includes eating habits.

While thus far we have spoken about the “Americain” effect in fast food and businesses, we have ignored the influence of American tourists on local pop culture. In the context of the Americain effect, it is not possible to ignore the tastes and opinions of Americans visiting Paris. In an article by Rainbow Rowell entitled “Golden Arches Triumph in Paris”, an American mother was amazed not only at not having to deal with a crush of people to get what her family wanted, she reported the food as the best McDonald’s food she has eaten in her life. Responsible might be the fact that McDonald’s France takes pride in getting a majority if not all of its products from France.

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<sup>6</sup> McKinsey Paris, for instance, has adapted to the 35-hour workweek by instead allowing its associates to take an extra week of vacation during the summer.

### Menu Adaptations to the French "Savoir Vivre"

When McDonald's entered Paris and other foreign markets, its policy was very simple. They would not adapt to foreign cultures, but rather change the cultures to fit McDonald's (Love). However, McDonald's quickly learned that in order to succeed in France, it too had to bend to the ways of the French. This is particularly evident in the menu adaptations it has made over the years. In this respect, significant efforts were made on the front of French "Pride" for its national products. As reported by the company, in 2001 75% of food supplies for French operations came from France (Pfanner).

In a very generalized manner, McDonald's has added items that would otherwise not be found at your typical American McDonald's. For example, Parisian McDonald's offer Evian Water amongst the options for beverages along with Coke and the other carbonated beverages.

For breakfast, they have not changed much. They have, however, added Dannon brand yogurt to their offerings. While the French do not eat much for breakfast (Normally a croissant and coffee will do), this addition is representative of the type of adaptations they must make to satisfy their clientele. Most recently they added to their breakfast menu options such as mini croissants and "pain au chocolat" or chocolate bread.

The regular lunch and dinner menu has also had its adaptations. From the very popular "Royale with Cheese", made famous by John Travolta in the Academy Award Nominated film "Pulp Fiction"<sup>7</sup>, to other true and tangible changes, McDonald's has had to adapt. For instance, among its value menu

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<sup>7</sup> It is known as the Quarter Pounder with Cheese in the US.

options, there is one that offers a vegetable platter or salad shaker instead of fries.

The latest addition to this array of "French Adaptations" is the infamous "Croque McDo". With this one McDonald's has successfully recreated the traditional French Croque Monsieur in its own style. Round as opposed to square, as is normally found in the streets of Paris, the "Croque McDo" is in fact no different. Between the toasted grilled slices of bread you will find the traditional melted emmental cheese and ham.

Salads have even been taken to a new level with options that include shrimp and a complex "chef's salad". McDonald's has also added a number of other French twists. It adds less sugar and more mustard to its salad dressings to accommodate the French palate (Greenhouse 14). They also have managed to not only include the regular "French Fries" on the menu, but have adapted to the local tastes through the offering of steak fries. Both are served with the traditional mayonnaise. Beverages have also taken new meaning. In this category, and in reply to the French traditional coffee, they have included espresso. In addition, in response to the early afternoon drink that goes along with the lunch meal, they now include Kronenbourg beer.

While these are only a few of the adaptations made by McDonald's to meet the French palate, many others exist. The examples presented here just go to show the extent to which McDonald's has had to go in order to really succeed in the French Capital. These are some adaptations the local chains have not had to endure simply because of their indigeneity to the French culture and its consumers.

While McDonald's has had to make adaptations to the "French Savoir Vivre", the case has not been the same for some of its competitors.

McDonald's main competitor and rival, who at some point was the unrivaled dominant in the Parisian market, Quick, having its roots in Belgium, had no problem in adapting to the French style of living. Nevertheless, offerings today match those of McDonald's denoting the ability of the American multi-giant to rapidly adapt. McDonald's has since taken over first place in preference in the Parisian and the French market.

In creating a menu selection that could satisfy the Parisian consumer, a lot more had to go into it than an extensive knowledge of the culture and its needs. These menu adaptations required a marketing machine capable of convincing the Parisian public that their fast food was the way to go.

McDonald's in particular set out to convince Parisians, and the French in general, that McDonald's is the "Frenchest" of companies in the country. On one hand, one ad alludes to the French and their love of salads. Other features a cowboy in his Stetson hat speaking about the French and their avoidance of genetically modified food. The best of the responses from marketing adaptation to the French public is the slogan that has reappeared in many rubrics around the country: "McDonald's. Born in the USA. Made in France (Henley 24)."

On a different note, it is interesting to see that French chefs abroad do see the winds of change wafting into their kitchens. One very interesting adaptation is the "retro" adaptation performed by French Chefs in the US. Some have gone about recreating the hamburger into a delicacy at their restaurants. A very tangible example is what Chef Daniel Boulud has done in

his restaurant "Bistrot Moderne" in New York. Described as the modern French-American Bistrot where the traditions of French cuisine meet the flavors of the American market<sup>8</sup>, he has added a unique burger to his menu. Retailing at \$50 a burger, this patty has two French classics: foie gras, and black truffles. This is arguably the best, and most expensive burger in America. Chef Boulud is also the proud owner of three other restaurants, different in both style and menu repertoire. The question this raises is an important one. Are chefs in France soon to adapt in their offerings and types of restaurants within Paris?

#### *From Art Classique to Art Deco*

Many of McDonald's detractors have objected primarily not because of the food, but because of what it would do to their neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> McDonald's quickly adapted to this by making sure their restaurants were in accordance with the local culture and décor. The McDonald's located in the heart of the Champs Elysées is now seen as a typical fixture in this famous avenue of the French capital. Placed on the site formerly occupied by Burger King<sup>10</sup>, this McDonald's is called "Music", a restaurant with blue booths and chairs, and numerous CD players and TVs on the walls that constantly blast tunes and videos. From the French consumer's perspective, "Its not the food. It is the same." A 30-year-old Hugo Boss salesman goes on to explain that it is the ambiance what makes the difference. To confirm, Anne Lizot, a 22-year-old student in Paris, has a McDonald's near her home, but goes out of

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<sup>8</sup> <http://danielnyc.com/dbbistro/>

<sup>9</sup> This point is later discussed in the paper

<sup>10</sup> Burger King Completed its pullout from France in 1998.

her way to visit the "Music" outlet. She explains she likes to watch music videos as she dines (Leung A6).

Still maintaining its McDonald's charm, which is the attraction for many adolescents, the restaurant has served as example for other franchisees in the country. For instance, Michel Reglat, a Toulouse franchisee, redid the interiors of 12 of his 14 restaurants, including one with barstools made from bicycle seats. He spent 20% more than if he had followed the traditional design, but sales also soared by as much as 20% (Gogoi and Matlack). There seems to be a direct correlation between the décor of the restaurant and its sales. Not surprisingly, the Champs Elysée McDonald's is the most lucrative of them all, not only in the capital city, but in the country. In essence, McDonald's outlets are now unrecognizable and have been made to look like French bistros, not a golden arch or a plastic chair in sight (Nicolson 9).

The décor has also been deemed responsible for McDonald's taking up another aspect of the traditional French café into consideration when refurbishing their restaurants. With chic interiors and extras such as music videos, patrons are enticed to linger over their meals (Gogoi and Matlack). This is particularly different from what occurs in the US, where managers, even in higher end restaurants are concerned about revenues and loitering guests.

The numbers tell the story, since the remodeling began in 1998, remodeled restaurants tallied sales increases anywhere from 3% to 20% a year (Leung A6).



McDonald's Paris Champs Elysées - © McDonald's France 2002

### Ronald McDonald vs. Asterix:

Part of the adaptation to the French way of life has a lot to do with who is representing the restaurant. McDonald's has traditionally used Ronald McDonald as a character to attract children. In a country in which they have come under criticism for not respecting local customs, McDonald's has taken a bold step by substituting Ronald McDonald with none other than the indigenous character "Asterix"<sup>11</sup> and his sidekick "Obelix". The idea is to represent a victory for French exceptionalism, and is an idea that might even

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<sup>11</sup> Asterix and Obelix first made their appearance 43 years ago in the French magazine *Pilote*. Since then, more than 30 books have chronicled their adventures in resisting the powerful Roman army in ancient Gaul circa 50 BC.

help McDonald's in turning the tide against traditionalists campaigning against the invasion of la malbouffe (junk food) (Campbell A3). Gregoire Champetier, McDonald's marketing director in France alludes to this campaign as not a direct reaction to José Bové and his movement against the restaurant chain, but merely as an attempt to play down the chain's US roots. Notwithstanding this purpose, it may be harder to trash a restaurant with Asterix standing outside than with Ronald (Campbell A3). This just goes to show how Asterix has become an icon in French Pop culture, and an example of how even a cartoon character could alter the psychological acceptance of foreign items by the French population. The controversy that came along rejecting this notion is also an example of how serious purists are in maintaining their traditions, even through a cartoon character.

This is the reason why many in France who are rightly proud of their nation's distinctive traditions fear that the appropriation of Asterix by Americans is a cultural Alesia, a nasty reminder of what Caesar did to Vercingetorix (Times London). For other French purists, the idea that Asterix might forsake his slow-cooked wild boar, gently roasted over a pit, for the instant delights of a Big Mac is cultural anathema (Bell). While the campaign was expected to run for a mere five-week period, these reactions are reasons to believe that there is a limit as to how far the French will allow any company to influence their culture.



**RONALD MCDONALD**  
© McDonald's Corporation



**ASTERIX**

Some French thinkers wonder if the marketing deal might actually mark a victory for France. "It may just look like McDonald's is giving in, and that in itself could win the company some sympathy in France," says Gilles Laurent, a marketing professor at HEC business school in Paris (Journal).

*The Evolving French Family: Teenagers and the new generation*

This is one particular aspect of French culture critical to any analysis on the evolving tastes of a society. As times have changed and the landscape in Paris has changed, so have the needs of the French and their families. Today more than ever women are an active part of the French workforce. More women hold jobs outside the home and everyone works at a faster pace, with shorter lunch hours (Pruess A1). This in itself has led to the change in teenage culture and what they have been raised on in terms of eating habits. As Alain Ducasse stated, tastes are acquired very early on in life (Platt).

Children eating at “McDo”, as McDonald’s is affectionally and disdainfully called by the French, has become an element of daily life. In her article “Paradox? What Paradox? The French are finally getting fat” Susan Loomis alludes to this fact through a comment made to her by a Chef friend of hers who told her about two children with full-time working parents who eat dinner every night at their neighborhood McDo.

The French family is at the roots of the success of fast food in the French capital and the country as a whole. How can this be when studies have revealed that only 8% of the customers of hamburger outlets visit in families (Fantasia 224)? The truth lies in the influence that is extended through the family as a unit to individual members of society. Industry studies have revealed that the growing number of women in the workforce, increases in the discretionary income of teenagers, weakening family ties placing less emphasis on family mealtimes, the expansion of the “journée continue” in the workplace (the working day without extended meal breaks) creating a need for both fast food and workplace catering systems, and increased urban congestion which prevent workers from traveling home and back at midday (forcing workers to take their meals in the city) are some, if not the main reasons, behind the great success of fast food in Paris and in France (Fantasia 205). This alone gives us a glimpse into the various changes undergone by the traditionalistic “French family” as we know it. Tackling each of these assumptions is revealing. Besides the obvious elements such as the growing number of women in the labor force and the reduction in lunch hours during the workday (a subject tackled in the 35-hour workweek chapter of this paper), the fact that teenagers have increased the amount of their

expendable income is a clear indication of two things. On one side, teenagers are working more than they used to. This mimics the American standard of teenagers joining the workforce while in school. The trend, not surprisingly has been for teenagers to join the ranks of fast food restaurants as employees. This has been a more pronounced trend as of recent years. The second is the fact that working parents outside the home who are not present for meal times increase the amount adolescents receive to take care of themselves. One question does remain: Have family ties really been broken within the French family as a result?

In spite of what these findings reveal, sociologists and psychologists, speaking about language and how the French have managed to maintain a high discourse without destruction of their language, contend that the French family structure remains intrinsically intact. In other words, French people still speak to one another at home, even over dinner (Lichfield). While these experts in psychology and sociology contend that the above is true, the question still remains "Are French families really having dinner together?" The answer is more than likely a resounding NO! Evidence in part is the message sent by McDonald's France to the French consumer regarding health and children not eating more than once a week at McDonald's in addition to the alarming rates of obesity in French teenagers. This rate has increased in recent years from 10 to 16% (Donegan). McDonald's France seemed to make a link between the two subjects.

But, how much has the French family changed in the past few years? Jeanette Kupfermann, author of various books on gender issues, describes the main differences between the way British and French children are raised.

She presents clear evidence that the French have not changed all that much in their raising of children. As she mentions, French mothers do work outside the home as well as British mothers do, and their children are also exposed to the worst of television and pop music. She gives a perfect example of eating habits of British and French children in a train car. While the British kids ate clumsily in their casual garb, the French children, beautifully attired, ate grapes even with knife and fork in hand. Not a crumb anywhere. The British parents opted to return to their cabin to feed their children in shame. The key point here is that while the lifestyle of the French family has changed (parents working late and children more on their own), not much has changed in terms of how children are raised. This leads to believe that it is not the way children have been raised that leads to the adoption of fast food as a means of nourishment, but rather an unruly necessity. A clear conclusion is that if the French could have it another way, they probably would. However, can we say the same about teenagers and their growing love for fast food?

*And the Teens say...*

Teenagers are in a league of their own and have been the subject of analysis by specialists and consultants. One particular consultant, Bernard Boutboul, carried out a survey that revealed the 15-25 age group is rapidly losing its appetite for McDonald's despite the company's attempt to adapt and broaden its menu with the production of "French" items such as salads and yogurts (Donegan). However, other studies do arrive at the conclusion that what matters in the fast food industry is image. In various interviews,

teenagers asked about their appeal to fast food suggested it was the “self-service” feature that attracted them to fast food joints. They consistently made comments regarding their ability to choose where to sit and not having to wait to be served. Another element of French culture that teenagers expressed was a major plus was the lack of necessity to divide the check as each was required to pay individually.

These assertions are just confirmations of certain things that have become prevalent, at least for teenagers in Parisian society. There is simply a time and a place for everything. French society has set the ground rule of appropriate behavior at the dinner table. Fast food joints have created a refuge from that environment in which they feel accepted. All rules are off, there are no judgment calls, and everyone feels the freedom to be themselves. To these teenagers, it is evidently not about the food itself, but rather about having options. The reality as well is that adults that visit these places without their families also allow themselves a respite from the traditional rules of French dining. What makes it special for both groups is the novelty of it all. Both groups are clearly attracted by the fact that these places are so “American” and distinctly un-French in every way. This seems to contradict the direction McDonald’s chain is going in France to win over more customers.

Teenagers also proved extremely savvy regarding their understanding of the place of cafes and the distinction these have from fast food outlets. When asked by researchers for the Center for the Study of Commerce and Distribution regarding the future of cafes in Paris and whether these would be replaced by fast food restaurants, teenagers agreed that the latter would

never replace the café as a fixture in Parisian culture. They even resisted the thought of placing the two in the same category. Their thoughts on the café were consensual: "No, it's different, the café is more human – you can feel the presence of people; there's a warmer atmosphere there, people are not in a hurry (Fantasia 225)."

### *The Effect of the short-lived 35-hour workweek*

Starting the summer of 2001 the French adopted an unprecedented work policy: a 35-hour workweek. At the time many considered it a good thing for the working masses. The socialist government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin came up with this policy as a "gift" to the French people. What no one really knew at the time were the ramifications of this policy.

The 35-hour workweek has had positive and negative effects on French culture in general. On the positive end, some workers have reported being able to spend more time with their families. Conversely others have complained about the impossibility of garnering overtime wages. Small enterprises have been the most affected as they could no longer hire as many individuals. But, how does this law affect the culture of eating and fast food?

In very simple terms, over the past few years, many aspects of work life have changed the way Parisians live and eat. One of them is the entrance of women into the workforce in stronger numbers, another is the fact that employees were granted shorter lunch hours to make up for the time lost due to the 35-hour workweek imposed by the government. One enlightening

example is the one presented by British firm Marks & Spencer and how they are handling the challenges of a 35-hour workweek.

Marks & Spencer has had the same challenges many firms have faced in Paris with the inception of the 35-hour workweek. The main challenge: How to get the same amount of work done in less time. One option they considered was to cut break times out of a normal work day. However, the law requires Marks & Spencer to keep breaks. As a solution, Marks & Spencer has come up with something new: "Our lunch break, which is not working time, is to be cut by a quarter of an hour and this quarter of an hour we lose at mid-day will have to be used as a break during the day" (Financial Times).

Less time to eat automatically translates into consumers seeking the most efficient meal available. Fast food stepped in as an answer to this need. According to reports, sales of fast food over the last 20 months (the time of the existence of this law), have dramatically increased. As a financial analyst in Paris, Slim Hamrouni explained " The passage into the 35 hours does not permit taking one's time over lunch and to be productive in the afternoon (Arrivet and Zagrodzki 2)".

### *Potential War in Iraq and US-French differences*

Historically, France and the US have been allies in most international conflicts over the course of history. The sense of loyalty amongst these two nations dates back to the founding of the US. After all, the Statue of Liberty is in fact a gift from the French. The French were also liberated from the fangs of Adolf Hitler through the aid of the US armed forces. Considering these rather positive relations over the years, it is rather surprising (to some,

at least) to see the stance French leaders have taken against a potential war with Iraq in 2003. While this paper, by no means, attempts to address opinions on whether or not the French are justified or not in their assertions, it does force us to look at Pop Culture as influenced by the political events of our times. What a better opportunity but to explore how the French consumer of fast food is reacting to the diplomatic conflict between these two nations.

According to businessmen, appeals made in the US to boycott French products issued amid the current standoff between France and the US over Iraq policy are beginning to have an impact on bilateral trade (Moutot 1). Among the many things that have been seen over the past few weeks, orders of French wines from US retailers have been cancelled or reduced in size. They do admit that this has not affected them dramatically, but that customers do state this reaction has to do directly with French foreign policy. Restaurants have removed French beverages all the way to Evian spring water from their offerings. Some merchants have been placed in a compromising position as their patrons are military personnel, or civilians who have relatives waiting in the Gulf for the prospects of war.

While some merchants, as the ones above, state that the downturn on sales has been mild, others have quantified their losses as dramatic. One even declared "It is not the end of the world, if you sell three of four thousand a day, but if France vetoes a US-backed resolution at the United Nations, I will be out of business in two months". Quantified, his daily losses amount to about 25 cases. He is based out of Washington DC (Moutot)

Politicians in the US have also considered drastic measures against French items. Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert even considered imposing sanctions against French wines that control 12 and 13 percent of the US wine market in protest. While the probability of Congress acting affirmatively on this proposition is slim, the fact that politicians are making a case regarding this will be the subject of commentary for years to come.

With examples such as these, and that of others pouring premium “Champagne” into sewers outside embassies and restaurants, this phenomenon has been nothing but sensationalized by the media. It is easy to reach this conclusion based on national reports that reflect that it is but a few isolated sites that have reported massive losses. It is somewhat expected for the Washington DC vendor to suffer more than one based out of California. After all, California wines have already proven to be tough competition for French wines in the US market. This too shall pass. However, it serves as a true testament to how politics and pop culture; and how food consumption and war, go hand in hand. The above, nonetheless, is half the story. This document details the effect of fast food on French dining habits and culture in Paris. The findings may seem astonishing.

When looking at the French/Parisian side of this debacle, it is impossible not to acknowledge the reality of France and Paris. These boast the largest Muslim population of any country in Western Europe (Martin). Today, they represent an impressive 10% of the total population in France. This amounts to approximately 5 million people. In Paris, about 1% of inhabitants are Muslim. Important to note is that these figures represent individuals who practice the Muslim Faith, and not peoples of Arab descent,

practicants of other religions, and individuals opposed to the potential war in Iraq. What does this mean? While there have been no reports of defection among the ranks of American fast food faithfuls in Paris, the Muslim community within the city has stood together in an unofficial boycott of all things American. Compared to the US French boycott that has sparked controversy this year, the Muslim boycott has been taking place over the last two years particularly as a result of the perceived mistreatment of Arabs and Muslims after September 11, 2003.

Avid fans of fast food have to admit that we cannot by any means disassociate the Big Mac and its generous side portion of fries from the gigantic "Coke" that comes along to complete the package. We must face reality. Coca-Cola is a symbol of American Pop culture, and an undeniable element of fast food. This is relevant because Coke has been one of the brands that have suffered over the years in Paris, but particularly recently with the world climate we face. To rival Coke, a Muslim French entrepreneur came up with "Mecca Cola", a rival product that not only is taking Paris by storm, it has increased sales all over the Muslim world in protest to American imperialism, but today, more so in protest against Iraq War policies. Mecca Cola is primarily distributed in France (where 27% of consumers agreed that the US deserved 9/11 in some way, according to research from ad agency Euro RSCG Worldwide) (Brand Strategy, 10).

The message here is clear, there is a turntable in Paris, while less dramatic than that in the US, over the current situation in Iraq which is affecting the fast food sector in Paris. The issue mainly has to do with brands. Wally Owens, owner of the brand agency Saffron stated that brands

are the flagship of American Popular Culture, and as such, they are often seen as offensive to local communities (Brand Strategy 10). Brands that have suffered to Parisian Muslims within the fast food/Beverage industry are the ones to be expected: McDonald's and Coke. The main reason, these items are considered luxuries in a culture where options abound. Primary necessity items such as computers, have not affected sales by American manufacturers such as Dell. As all arguments are presented in this paper, our main conclusions must hinge on one main element outside the realm of fast food, the bigger picture on how this has really affected American Business in France and in the US. The Franco-American trade relationship is worth \$50 billion a year. Americans, however, consume more Roquefort and Perrier than the French eat McDonald's and Coke. France exports more than \$28 billion worth of goods and services to the US every year, while the US exports \$19 billion to France (Ravner). In France the national psyche has been filled with suspicion of American intentions ever since President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech. With the current political economic environment in which we live, the message, at least on the side of the French, is clear: It's hard to open a French newspaper and not find a cartoon which links the global ambitions of the 43<sup>rd</sup> US President (George W. Bush), with the global ambitions of American fast food chains (Donegan).

### *Fast Forward to Operation Iraqi Freedom*

While the sentiments of Parisians before the war somewhat sympathized with the Muslim populace in the city, since the war in Iraq began the landscape for American products, and especially fast food has

dramatically changed. The recent events in the Middle East have adversely affected the business in the French capital.

In Paris, demonstrators recently smashed the windows of a McDonald's restaurant, forcing police in riot gear to protect the staff and customers. The attackers then spray-painted obscenities and the word "boycott" on the restaurant (Marcus). The company has been targeted as a symbol of American capitalism and imperialism. Since these events, police have been put on alert of McDonald's being the subject of future vandalism and retaliation, at least during the duration of the war. At the moment this research is being conducted, no further information is available regarding other such incidents. However, we can easily conclude that the outcome of the war and its aftermath will have a great deal of influence on McDonald's and how it goes on about its expansions in Paris and the rest of the country.

#### **IV- ANTI-FAST FOOD MOVEMENTS (The Detractors)**

Precisely because of the current politico/economic environment in which this thesis is being written, a distinct separation between the boycott on American fast food in Paris, and other Anti-fast food movements in France and in Paris needs to be made. Here the latter are discussed.

##### *McDonald's France vs. McDonald's USA*

Let the games begin! In an unprecedented move, in May 2002 the French subsidiary of the mega US company placed a full one page add in "Femme Actuelle", one of the leading French magazines for women, suggesting to parents that visits by their kids to fast food outlets should be limited (Burros C7). The article went even further to suggest that eliminating fast food from the diet of kids these days is counterproductive, but at the same time, "there is no reason to eat excessive amounts of junk food, nor go more than once a week to McDonald's (Burros C7).

The article differed tremendously from companywide policy. Needless to say, a spokesperson for McDonald's Headquarters came forth and declared a staunch disagreement in the statement, saying "we do not share this view." While the company was quick to retort, the problem lies in lack of evidence. True to form, the French article presented the opinions of two different nutritionists. One, Agnes Mignonac, wrote that as long as the child exercised regularly, ate healthily and wasn't overweight, a once-a-week treat was harmless. For overweight children, she advised a hamburger rather than deep-fried Chicken McNuggets (Johnson 5). The article came in response to the alarming figures on obesity in children in the country. These figures

showed the number of obese children had doubled to 16% in 10 years. Along with our study and making comparisons on the number of outlets located in the French Capital, it is fair to conclude these estimates do refer in great part to children residing in the city of Paris, where parents have expressed a dramatic change in their lifestyles. These adults now rely more than they used to on fast food restaurants for the nutrition of their children.

In addressing the French controversy, Jack Greenberg, former CEO of the McDonald's Corporation, in a presentation before the Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies at the University of Pennsylvania tended to disagree with the French approach to tackling a social issue. The article presented in *Femme Actuelle*, he explained, was not the opinion of McDonald's France, but the opinion of two nutritionists. While in his view they made a mistake, the firm had no intentions of taking autonomy away from the French or any of its other affiliates worldwide. After all, they needed the French team in order to succeed in France.

The main cultural feature in this debacle, comes not only from the fact that the article detailing the harm of fast food came first from the French, what clearly denotes a dramatic cultural difference is the reactions of not only the American Headquarters, but also that of the British affiliate as well. A spokeswoman for McDonald's Britain said "No one food should be regarded as healthy or unhealthy. It's common sense that physical exercise and balance are important, so it's not possible to recommend a specific number of visits. Parents should take into account the child's overall diet, lifestyle and level of activity (Johnson 5). For the company, this comes at a time in which it has been the subject of a much debated and publicized US lawsuit where

people claimed McDonald's food made people fat and that they mislabeled some of their vegetarian items (Ritzer A30). The results on company performance have been dramatic. Not only has the stock lost 40% of its value, it has posted its first ever quarterly loss since going public. McDonald's has responded to its perils by exiting underperforming markets and by putting planned expansions on hold. The situation is not over. New lawsuits have since come to the scene with a vengeance. While the company is giving these new claims the cold shoulder, they involve precisely the menu item mentioned by French nutritionist Mignonac above, the Chicken McNugget. It is fair to assume, as the firm is being treated as the tobacco company of fast food, this is not the end of lawsuits against McDonald's. The question is, will these trickle over to France, particularly in consideration of the rising obesity in children in that country. Furthermore, will claims overseas be enough to bring down the giant to its knees? The jury is still out on this question. In any event, how is the situation in France? It is in France where McDonald's has been the most successful in Western Europe.

### José Bové

This analysis would not be complete without the mention of legendary French farmer/agro-engineer José Bové. While he is not by any means indigenous to the city of lights, his efforts have been more than felt all over the country. As a sheep farmer and political activist, it was Bové who in 1999 led a group of angry protesters in the demolition of a McDonald's under construction in his native town of Millau. His attitude of disdain towards "la malbouffe" (junk food) made him a hero in all over France. In a country

divided between conservatives and socialists, he was invited to rub elbows with both the president and the prime minister. His philosophy is that Frenchmen should not become "servile slaves at the service of agribusiness". During July of 2002 and estimated thirty thousand demonstrators gathered in Millau when José Bové went on trial, some carrying signs that said "Non a la McMerde (Schlosser 244)." His prison sentence was later shortened by a presidential pardon (Pfanner 11). He was sentenced to a total of three months in prison.

McDonald's has reacted to the entire situation with José Bové with dignity and humor. The chief of McDonald's France, Denis Hannequin, responded with lighthearted newspaper ads depicting fat, ignorant Americans who could not understand why McDonald's France used locally produced food that wasn't genetically modified (Matlack and Gogoi 2).

For José Bové, the situation is quite clear. McDonald's represents the worst of three evils: globalization, multinationals, and the power of the markets. He states they stand for industrially produced food: bad for traditional farmers and bad for our health. Lastly, it's a symbol of America. It comes from the place where they not only promote globalization and industrially produced food but also unfairly penalize our peasants (Henley 24). Based on this, it is therefore not surprising that McDonald's France as we have explained in this research, has attempted on all fronts to present itself as the Frenchest of companies. Remembering that at least 75% of the products used by McDonald's come from France, it is very difficult for these detractors to succeed in making their point regarding the lack of support to farmers.

### *The Jewish quarter and the Picasso Protectionists*

The residents of the Rue des Rosiers, the main thoroughfare of Paris' old Jewish quarter were determined to keep the fast food giant from invading their neighborhood. McDonald's had chosen none other than one of the districts oldest buildings, a former Turkish bath. More than 1000 local residents signed a petition objecting to the plans, some on the basis that McDonald's was not kosher (although there was a proposal to serve kosher Big Macs) and hundreds more who argued that large fast-food restaurant would irredeemably ruin the character of one of the few unspoilt quarters of central Paris (Lichfield 14).

The opinions of locals who inhabit the district was clear. One stated "I have nothing against McDonald's. My kids love to eat McDonald's. But it would not fit on this street." Another agreed "At the moment, the Rosiers is a delicate and perfectly happy balance of Jews and non-Jews. A McDonald's would bring people who wouldn't respect or understand that. It would ruin everything (Lichfield 14)." Without much contest, McDonald's withdrew the petition to place a restaurant in that quarter. This just goes to show that even McDonald's does not get everything it wants.

Another incident worthy of mention is the disgraceful food fight that took place in 1996 to keep McDonald's out of a building known to be where Picasso bought paints for his masterpieces (Kole). Opponents to the measure contend the French capital is already full of McDonald's outlets everywhere. One even asked "Is it really necessary to add another fast-food outlet here?" While Parisians have been somewhat tolerant of the "American Imperialism"

that comes along with the entrance of McDonald's they do seem prepared to protect their history and patrimony. For instance, in 1993 Paris officials blocked the American hamburger chain from opening an eatery near the Eiffel Tower (Kole). Again, in the case of the "Picasso" McDonald's, the company opted out of the deal citing "technical difficulties" on getting a construction permit (Kole). By the time of the withdrawal, the petition against the outlet had registered a total of over 16,000 signatures.

### *The Retort of the Angry Chefs*

One of the main groups of detractors of fast food over the years indisputably has been the family of French chefs. Not only have these professionals of the "haute cuisine" been the subject of humiliation through the closing of restaurants and bistros in Paris that are being somewhat substituted by McDonald's outlets, the government has refused to grant them a significant tax break that is given to McDonald's and other major fast food outlets. It is the European Union that refuses to grant them the tax break. Governments want to maximize tax revenue, while EU officials want to create a common sales tax rate. In terms of cuisine, the more elaborate and labor intensive the restaurant the more it is taxed. In France, fast food restaurants are taxed less because a take-out is considered easy to prepare food made with basic ingredients, just like buying a sandwich from a supermarket. The chefs demand that the value-added tax on restaurant meals be slashed to 5.5% from 19.6%. Fast food restaurants such as McDonald's already enjoy the lower 5.5% rate (Newman 2).

The rivalry and sentiments of disdain are especially strong in cities where gastronomy is a way of life. Paris is one of these cities. Statements we have already seen, such as that by French Minister of Culture Jack Lang, French chefs in the cosmopolitan capital city have had their share of words against the industry. But, as they say in the US, if you cannot beat them, join them. As of recently they have acquiesced in their disdain and have decided to launch a full campaign of competition to the various fast food outlets. One such campaigner is six star Michelin chef Alain Ducasse. He already has been quoted in this document regarding his acknowledgement of the changing tastes in the French palate and eating habits. He has now made his own adaptations to fast food by opening his own sandwich bar in Paris last fall (Sage). The result has been astounding. The legendary Alain Ducasse, whose Spoon on rue Marignan defined fusion food, has two new addresses: Le Boulangepicier, a gourmet interpretation of the sandwich bar on boulevard de Courcelles where customers enjoy their food standing up, and Aux Lyonnais, on rue St-Marc, behind the Grands Boulevards, a street dotted with family-run bistros (Phillips 12). Lesser-known chefs are currently conjuring up their own recipes for success in the fast food industry.

Another well-known Michelin Three Star Chef Antoine Wastermann stated, "fast food has been ignored by la Haute gastronomie, but I think that has to change (Sage 20)."

#### **IV. THE FUTURE: WHERE IS FAST FOOD GOING IN PARIS?**

Taking McDonald's as an example, it is evident that the fast food industry has not only responded to the needs of the French consumer, it is here to stay for good. As McDonald's readies to close 175 outlets worldwide, a new McDonald's opens in France every six days. What is even more, the typical French consumer spends \$9 per visit vs. only \$4 in the US. Even though a Big Mac costs about the same in Paris as it does in New York (Gogoi and Matlack) (Appendix B). However, there is more to conclude about the phenomenon of fast food in Paris than what the future for McDonald's holds.

It is obvious that the lifestyle of the French has changed over the past twenty years. Gone are the days of the Leisure Lunch, and in are the days of practicality. However, some things will never change. The French may sacrifice the time they spend eating, but they will not sacrifice *what* they eat. This has forced fast food chains and local restaurants to come up with acceptable alternatives to the French palate. Considering renowned French chefs have now entered the fray, fast food is in Paris to stay and will even come around full force with a vengeance as one of the world culinary trends to follow. We recently have seen these effects in the Defense district, where Alain Ducasse competes not with the bigger chains, but with restaurants such as Lina's Sandwiches. Just because there is not enough time does not mean one has to settle for a less than acceptable meal. In addition, why should Parisians have to sacrifice their early afternoon drink? Fast food restaurants have quickly added this to their offerings. However, can the gourmet chefs

compete and owners of the locally crafted fast food joints compete against the perennial giants?

In an ever changing world, and ironically in a city that prides itself as the culinary capital of the world, not even the prestige may make up for the trend that has taken over the French capital. While chefs look down on the Big Mac, the French flock to McDonald's and other fast food outlets. In the world's haven for fine cuisine, price is winning the battle over good taste (Newman 2). How do we know this? Well, the statistics regarding the closing of bistros and other restaurants tell the story eloquently. The danger to haute cuisine is clear: About 3,000 restaurants close each year in France, while McDonald's opens between 70 and 80 outlets (Newman 2). Some analysts argue fast food restaurants are not to blame for the perils of bistros. Other theorists argue it is the fast food industry what has begun the demise of the café-bars all around the city. The reality is that not adapting to change is what destroyed many of these establishments. Based on a number of emerging needs, the French are no longer willing to either wait, or pay more. Still, these giants will not be able to get away with these accomplishments unscathed.

Fast food giants, while apparent victors in the battle of fast food in Paris, do face major challenges ahead. Utilizing McDonald's as our benchmark once again, the company has had a rather mediocre year, posting its first loss in years. What does this mean for the company in Paris? While the company continues to make decisions regarding where to exit, it also reveals that the French market by far is one of the most profitable overseas.

what problems do they face in Paris? Opposed to what detractors may

think, the problem McDonald's and other American mega giants or medium sized companies in fast food must face is a problem of image. Once these companies overcome this challenge, their future is almost certain. There is a lot of ground to cover, as for every 9 sandwiches sold in France, only 1 hamburger is sold<sup>12</sup>, but, that is what makes companies like McDonald's trailblazers and seekers of challenges to surmount. However, even they must remain cognizant of the reality that their French affiliate should continue to have the autonomy to make those decisions that are pertinent and crucial for the French market. Contrary to the example presented in this paper, McDonald's may want to reconsider intervening when drastic measures are taken such as the article in *Femme Actuelle*. The article in that case was probably doing more good than harm.

Critics have argued that because of fast food the French palate will become less sophisticated. While Alain Ducasse never said this, he did speak about how the French must now adapt to registering tastes at a much faster pace than ever before. This is just part of the process of evolution. The tradition of haute cuisine will continue notwithstanding the successes of fast food. However, it will inevitably have to adapt to the changing needs of consumers. Nothing will take the place of the traditional French restaurant, but adaptation is key for survival.

When looking at the current composition of the French family, it is inevitable to conclude that fast food is here to stay. Teenagers have already embraced this as part of their culture. Them being the key to the new France, a France a part of the European Union, it is obvious the phenomenon

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<sup>12</sup> McDonald's FR site

of fast food is not just a fad. While teenagers do understand the distinction and the value of other methods of dining such as the café, they also recognize that fast food is also an important part of their lives. All things considered, by default, future generations of Parisians have already accepted fast food into their lives. In addition, French families are traveling abroad now more than ever. The fact that they can find "McDonald's" everywhere they go is now as much as relief as it is for their American counterparts. The everlasting hatred of all things American by the part of the French is also a great sign of respect and admiration of American ingenuity. At this point, if French families could have it another way, they probably would. However, it is too late to turn back.

Where will fast food in Paris go? There will always be a distinction between American and French fast food. Only time will tell what the future holds for the industry in Paris. What is certain is that the French will continue to adapt; the chefs will continue to adapt; McDonald's will continue to adapt. José Bové will have to live with the fact that the "malbouffe" of today will inevitably become la haute cuisine of tomorrow. Will he cave in and eat, or will he starve to death in his cell?

APPENDIX A

<b>% of People who agree the world is becoming too Americanized</b>	
Argentina	64
Australia	70
Canada	66
Czech Republic	54
Denmark	50
Finland	65
<b>France</b>	64
Hong Kong	48
India	55
Ireland	49
Mexico	62
Netherlands	55
Poland	68
Puerto Rico	40
South Africa	63
Switzerland	70
United Kingdom	68
United States	40
<b>TOTAL</b>	57

Source: Euro RSCG Worldwide S.T.A.R. Generations and Gap Survey.

## Appendix B

<b>The golden-arches standard</b>					
	Big Mac prices		Implied PPP* of the dollar	Actual \$ exchange rate 25/04/00	Under(-)/over(+) valuation against the dollar, %
	in local currency	in dollars			
United States†	\$2.51	2.51	—	—	—
Argentina	Peso2.50	2.50	1.00	1.00	0
Australia	A\$2.59	1.54	1.03	1.68	-38
Brazil	Real2.95	1.65	1.18	1.79	-34
Britain	£1.90	3.00	1.32‡	1.58‡	+20
Canada	C\$2.85	1.94	1.14	1.47	-23
Chile	Peso1,260	2.45	502	514	-2
China	Yuan9.90	1.20	3.94	8.28	-52
Czech Rep	Koruna54.37	1.39	21.7	39.1	-45
Denmark	DKr24.75	3.08	9.86	8.04	+23
Euro area	€2.56	2.37	0.98§	0.93§	-5
France	FFr18.50	2.62	7.37	7.07	+4
Germany	DM4.99	2.37	1.99	2.11	-6
Italy	Lire4,500	2.16	1,793	2,088	-14
Spain	Pta375	2.09	149	179	-17
Hong Kong	HK\$10.20	1.31	4.06	7.79	-48
Hungary	Forint339	1.21	135	279	-52
Indonesia	Rupiah14,500	1.83	5,777	7,945	-27
Israel	Shekel14.5	3.58	5.78	4.05	+43
Japan	¥294	2.78	117	106	+11
Malaysia	M\$4.52	1.19	1.80	3.80	-53
Mexico	Peso20.90	2.22	8.33	9.41	-11
New Zealand	NZ\$3.40	1.69	1.35	2.01	-33
Poland	Zloty5.50	1.28	2.19	4.30	-49
Russia	Rouble39.50	1.39	15.7	28.5	-45
Singapore	S\$3.20	1.88	1.27	1.70	-25
South Africa	Rand9.00	1.34	3.59	6.72	-47
South Korea	Won3,000	2.71	1,195	1,108	+8
Sweden	SKr24.00	2.71	9.56	8.84	+8
Switzerland	SFr5.90	3.48	2.35	1.70	+39
Taiwan	NT\$70.00	2.29	27.9	30.6	-9
Thailand	Baht55.00	1.45	21.9	38.0	-42

\*Purchasing-power parity: local price divided by price in United States †Average of New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Atlanta ‡Dollars per pound §Dollars per euro  
Sources: McDonald's; The Economist

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