# Home Sweet Roadhouse.

By Matt Ferrence

I admit it here: against better judgment and contrary to prior experience, I occasionally tuck into a steak at Texas Roadhouse. Maybe it's the rolls and their wicked cinnamon butter that draws me in, maybe something else. It can't really be the rest of the food, since Texas Roadhouse, like any of the many interchangeable chain restaurants (Casual Dining, they like to call themselves), offers mediocre eating at above average price, coupled with long waits and, at least on my last visit, close proximity to a robust man enamored with the use of a walkie talkie.

Toward the end of our meal on that last visit, a young woman whisked by, stopping long enough to lean in and ask, "How was everything tonight?" My wife and I hardly had time to realize her managerial status, nor to even glance up from our basket of rolls, before she flittered away to the next table, offering the same sort-of question to another table. The message, though, was clear enough: the manager had neither truly cared about her question nor our answer. And why would she? Not her restaurant. Just her job.

This moment of feigned interest turned my thoughts to Paris, where we lived before, and to the corner pizza shop in our residential quarter. At least once a week, my wife and I checked in for *deux pizzas margueritas, deux Cocas, et une demi-bouteille de San Pellegrino*. At first, our presence was acknowledged, if not welcomed, by the half-scowled greeting of the owner. Later, after repeat visits proved our commitment, he began to recognize us, and our status slowly shifted toward the Regular. Once so-designated, the owner and his wait staff rewarded our visits with free seasoned olives, free before-dinner *kir*, free chilled Limoncello. The owner's scowl became a warm scowl, our presence a moment for real greeting, and in turn we gladly dropped a hundred Euros a month on his pizza, even though we liked the food better at a shop nearer our apartment. We pledged our fidelity to this pizza shop because the owner offered authentic care and affection toward us, his Regulars, even if capital exchange lay beneath the relationship.

At the Texas Roadhouse, the brief visit of the manager served as a façade of that authentic care, as a moment clarifying that only capital exchange governed our encounter. Her actions lacked an underlying authenticity of intent, and as such functioned as a Baudrillardian simulation of Regular status, as empty gestures intended to evoke the feeling of a caring owner-patron-relationship in the cause of finance.

Care, of course, lies at the heart of the declared Texas Roadhouse mission. They offer Legendary Food, Legendary Service®, a concept so integral to the chain that Texas Roadhouse had it legally registered. The manager, then, serves as the de facto owner dedicated to displaying the level of her commitment to her diners. Bound by the standards of Legendary Service, she must stop by to check our pleasure level. She is compelled to ensure that our visit to Texas Roadhouse has created the proper effect of care and down-home service.

Yet, as her brief stopover and failed eye contact revealed, the manager's commitment is not genuine. Her feigned interest, instead, serves as a moment designed to convince us of the replication of an owner who would, in other circumstances, actually care. Or, as Jean Baudrillard writes, her visit "is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (170). The manager offers a signified moment of Legendary Service, which works as a referent to some other experience of authentic care that cannot be found beneath the neon sign of Texas Roadhouse.

Certainly, the flitting manager cannot act alone in this simulation, as the body of Texas Roadhouses—all 200 of them—works to support the simulated experience of a local steak joint. The supporting cast around our faux-owner/manager includes peanuts, line-dancing, and Indian paintings: waiting customers get a bucket of peanuts to crack and munch and—best of all—discard on the floor in a physical homage to backwoods honky tonk; periodically, ecstatic waitresses break out in spontaneous fits of line-dancing; a giant painted Indian head creates a Western décor as big as Texas, as wild as the cowboys. Together, these images work to convince hungry patrons that the restaurant offers more than the sterility of a corporate chain. Further, by simulating the intimacy of a local dive, Texas Roadhouse can tap into the fuzzy scripts of familiarity that Americans enjoy following. In a type of restorative nostalgia that Svetlana Boym calls "modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols" (41), Texas Roadhouse plays to an American desire for locality, frankness, and personal identity: A simpler time—that doubtfully ever existed—when people knew each other and lived in greater community. We all want to be liked, known, welcomed as Regulars. So Texas Roadhouse, the corporate entity that simulates the corner restaurant, turns everyone into a "Regular," even on his or her first visit to the restaurant.

A crucial portion of this transformation comes via a careful Texas Roadhouse vocabulary, designed like ad slogans to create demand for a product. Steaks are not steaks; they are Hand Cut

Steaks. Rolls are Freshly Baked Rolls or Made From Scratch Rolls. Side orders are Home Made Sides. Remarkably, wait staff follows such scripting to the point of ridiculousness, repeating the designed phraseology every time the item bears mention: Shucks, I dropped your Hand Cut Steak on the floor.

In this feat of vocabulary, the staff of Texas Roadhouse raises menu items to iconic status. They commodify food with the empty language of advertising, language that Baudrillard calls "full of signification and empty of meaning" ("The System of Object" 20). At Texas Roadhouse, nostalgic signs of vocabulary align food with symbolic sites of Americana. A steak is Hand Cut, like the steak of an old-time butcher, and is therefore better than a non-Hand Cut Steak. Home Made sides suggest grandma in the kitchen, out on the farm, where and when food was wholesome and pure. But, as Baudrillard points out, in these cases the vocabulary offers only an emptiness of meaning, since the Homes that make the Sides are actually the kitchens of 200 identical Texas Roadhouses.

Further, the dedication to these terms suggests careful and complete employee training, no doubt reflected in the corporate training manuals used at the restaurants. So, naturally, I sought out those manuals for textual analysis. I first called the local manager, the faux-owner who likely spends much of her time training new wait staff. Pleased at my inquiry, she nonetheless deferred me to the national office: she lacked authority to release or comment on company documents. One the phone with corporate headquarters, I spent most of my time on hold, listening to recorded corporate propaganda about how Texas Roadhouse is Willie Nelson's favorite restaurant, which is why I'll find a Willie's Corner in every Texas Roadhouse. I can buy Willie Nelson junk in Willie's corner, which might explain why he likes the restaurants so much.

Eventually, I was ushered through several levels of Texas Roadhouse hierarchy to the director of training, who agreed to answer my questions on training, so long as none of the questions were about the actual training of employees. No chance to see the manual, since all in-house documents are confidential, I was told. The training director did, however, confirm that Texas Roadhouse is "down home," appeals "to anyone who loves good food at reasonable prices," and that each staff is really more like a family than a work group. As for the name Texas Roadhouse, despite the company's origins in Clarksville, Indiana, she assured me, "It's just a name," chosen in her view for aesthetic reasons: "Great lookin' flag. Good lookin' neon. Good

lookin' building." She cited Outback Steakhouse in her company's defense, that they were actually from Texas, despite the Australian tie-ins.

That Outback Steakhouse actually started in Tampa is neither crucial to what the director had to say, nor easily avoided in considering Texas Roadhouse, simulation, and Casual Dining in general. Tampa, Texas, anyone could make the error, but a name is never "just a name" when something is being sold. The guys who started Outback, granddaddy of chain Casual Dining restaurants, chose an Australian theme to cash in on then-popular Crocodile Dundee (Overfelt). For Texas Roadhouse, someone in the state of Indiana thought about steak, and cows, and how cows and steak seem to just fit with an image of Texas. Cowpunchers, Indians, cattle drives, good home cookin'. Texas just sounds steakly, so it fits perfectly when you want to sell some meat. Theme your restaurant after Indiana, and you don't get the same image. Though, oddly, a popular chain restaurant in Paris, a kind of French Casual Dining place, takes the name Indiana Café.

But the training director, well, maybe she believes that Texas Roadhouse is just a name, that Texas Roadhouse makes a lot of money because their servers are a "family," that the steaks really are better because they are Hand Cut. At some level, though, her evasive answers reveal the extensive scripting of Legendary Service, which might in fact be aimed not so much at customers as employees. The Texas Roadhouse simulacrum, then, might be governed by Foucault's social panopticon. From store manager to corporate executive, no one really wants to risk violating the unseen power structure. No one wants to risk letting loose corporate information that, despite its seeming innocence, could nonetheless anger the vague but real power structure of Texas Roadhouse. Nor does anyone want to accidentally refer to a steak as just a steak, to break the script of the company.

Imagine, then, my poor local Texas Roadhouse manager. There she is, forced to simulate her concern for every customer, to simulate her existence as a local owner, and not just a corporate cog. All that, and she still lacks power. She might be able to set shifts for the servers, maybe hire and fire a bit, maybe keep tabs on when the Hand Cut steaks are running low, but she doesn't have anything like the power and autonomy of the local restaurant owner she simulates. She might get to act like our French pizza maker, but she can't really act as he does. She lacks the power to differentiate between regulars and casual diners, because everyone at Texas Roadhouse is a Casual Diner and a Regular. Or, rather, everyone assumes the role Casual Diner, assumes signified presence as Regular.

In a broader sense, consider the training director's Texas icons—the flag, the neon, the building—each cited in defending the name choice. Only the flag has anything to do with Texas itself, and in the context of the restaurant is appropriated for reasons far different than the actual historical-cultural resonance of the image. As for the neon and the building, they have far more to do with Casual Dining than Texas. The hill where my Texas Roadhouse sits glows at night from the accumulated neon of other chain restaurants, each with building designs carefully forged to suggest Texas, or Italy, or a seaside fish shack. Yet at the same time, these disembodied signifiers function within the dining culture to produce a transferred locality. Texas Roadhouse is annually voted best place for a steak in this town, beating out long-lived, authentically local spots. In the same fashion, Applebee's restaurants successfully run tear-jerking TV ads that assign it status as the neighborhood grill—staying open late for the high school football team; putting a picture of a different local coach on the wall—and many of these chains adopt locality by tacking up décor based on hometown teams and artifacts. In the end, the accumulation of signs convinces a culture to adopt the empty as the authentic, hence the long-lines on weekend evenings, the Texas Roadhouse success in local dining competitions, and the growing difficulty of finding actual local businesses in middle America. Texas and neon, in this light, become legitimate signs of big commerce, though their perception remains infused with the American nostalgia that draws in customers attracted by the image of national culture. Yet at the same time, the national culture itself has been successfully replaced by the meaningless signs of places like Texas Roadhouse. Neon does suggest Texas, in the end, because Texas, the state, has been transformed into a sign for Texas Roadhouse, and now exists culturally only as a means to attract commerce. Becoming a Regular, in such a situation, merely demands that a person be a customer of this transferred national identity, to be a patron of commerce itself. So while becoming a Regular at a local pizza joint in Paris demands repeat visits and an earned relationship between owner and patron, becoming a Regular at Texas Roadhouse is predetermined by membership in the transferred American culture. It matters little, in the end, whether the manager actually asks or cares how everything was with a meal, because the fidelity of Regularity has been predetermined by the mere act of entering into the empty cultural space of Casual Dining.

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