



GET HELP

IN CODED DINING SPACES,
CUSTOMERS PLAY A ROLE, TOO

by Osayi Endolyn

I SAW WRITER-DIRECTOR Jordan Peele’s horror film *Get Out* (no spoilers here), about a young black man who meets his white girlfriend’s family for the first time during a visit to her parents’ estate. As the title suggests, the protagonist realizes something is not quite right, but he tries to rationalize the strange circumstances as nervous responses to his interracial relationship.

The film disturbed me, in part because those circumstances felt so familiar. Being a person of a color in environments that are predominantly white can be tricky. In one scene, a white neighbor remarks that he “knows Tiger,” in an apparent attempt to connect with the black visitor who shows only polite, marginal interest in golf. The moment is hilarious,

awkward, and offensive. I empathized with a character who struggles to identify why he’s being treated a certain way. Was he tapping into something that’s just not being talked about, or was he paranoid?

The traditional criteria for dining out are quality of food, level of service, and budget. I’m not sure when, but I recently added “vibe” to my list. I don’t mean physical ambiance or mood music. I mean, how does it feel for me to *be* in that space? Over the years, I’ve found that this experience is sometimes outside of a restaurant’s control. *Et tu*, fellow patron?

While ordering a pour of bourbon at an Atlanta airport bar last fall, an older white man seated nearby began to guide me toward “what’s good” on the spirits list. Maybe he was just

being neighborly, I thought later, sipping my Woodford Reserve neat (which I ordered unassisted, thank you). Strangers sitting at bars speak to one another, I reasoned. But his impromptu tutor session nagged at me. He didn’t seem concerned with helping anyone else.

Once, seated at the bar at a tapas restaurant in Asheville, the bartender asked my boyfriend and me a question that frequent restaurant-goers despise: *Have you dined with us before?* I usually lie and say yes, because I’d rather skip the speech that goes, *Small plates are small, entrées are larger, and drinks are, gasp! located in a box that says DRINKS.* But this night we told the truth, which yielded the requisite intro. A white woman seated two seats down with

continued, “The menu here can be so overwhelming, it’s so-oo much to take in.” She wasn’t going to let up. I was annoyed by her unsolicited comments. How did she determine we were lost in the weeds? Sorry, but we knew el pan from las papas.

“Thank you,” I said. “But we’ve both spent time in Barcelona, so I think we’ll be OK.” That was the end of that.

A couple weeks later, my friend chastised me for getting fresh. “She was just being nice,” he countered. I asked him: When was the last time he consistently received ordering advice from fellow customers? At bars? At wine shops? When was the last time a random diner assumed they naturally knew more than you about what you wanted to eat or drink and told you as much? “Never,” he said. His eyebrows rose with new insight. “That has never happend to me.”

Back at the theater, after the credits rolled, the lights turned on. Several black people were still glued to their seats. We migrated toward each other in the aisle and talked about the movie until the custodian kindly kicked us out. We were in agreement: while Peele toys with the social conditions of race and gender to make his (horror-inducing) point, the brilliance of the film is that he doesn’t have to try that hard to make typical experiences feel a notch past creepy. “You walk into a room,” one woman described being the only black person in a white space, “and it’s like all their eyes are on you.” ☹

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME A RANDOM DINER ASSUMED THEY NATURALLY KNEW MORE THAN YOU?

her companion, overheard and took interest. I could feel her staring as I eyed the menu. She leaned over and said, “We come here all the time. If you need any pointers, any suggestions, we can help.” I glanced up with a reserved smile and returned to my menu. She

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