class. The research dedicated to the culture of this social grouping in Israel, however, remains scant. Extant research establishes the privileged standing of this group, which consists of mainly Ashkenazi, secular and liberal Jews (Ram 2008), and that its distribution is similar to that in America-European contexts, that is, around 20 percent (Katz-Gerro 2009). The general scholarship finds that unlike the “older,” “industrial” middle class, the new class tends to cluster in the creative industries and endorse aspirational views (Binkley 2007; Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 2007; Katz-Gerro 2009; van Eijck and Mommaas 2004). Despite ongoing debates regarding the socio-political identifications and economic positioning of the new middle class, most scholars agree that this educated yet heterogeneous grouping evaluates choice-based life and that it produces and consumes leisure commodities and lifestyle services that maintain this aspirational disposition (Binkley 2007; Matusov and Smith 2012). The present article uses the lens of wedding food to focus on the lifestyles of the new middle class. It asks how new middle class consumers and producers of culture maintain symbolic class boundaries through their culinary tastes, as manifested in weddings. In exploring the new middle class, I contribute to an abundant sociological research on the postwar expansion of knowledge workers in capitalist societies.

Why weddings? As religious, community and consumerist public rituals, weddings enact social identities. In regards to the consumerist aspects of weddings, apparel, location, music, design and food are important markers of such identities. For Bourdieu (1984:79), “a meal served in an event occasion is an interesting indicator of the mode of self-presentation adopted in ‘showing off’ a lifestyle” (see also Jones 2007:129). Indeed, culinary decisions were meaningful in orchestrating many of the weddings I studied. The role of food in class-based distinctions is well documented. The present research joins this literature in focusing on the culinary preferences of new middle class “foodies” (Johnston and Baumann 2010), based on observations at weddings and forty-two semi-structured interviews with Israeli couples and wedding professionals.

Both couples and caterers at the weddings I studied pieced together diverse foodstuffs, so that menus revealed a taste for mixing and matching. This observation tallies with much previous research, which correlated a new middle class position with eclectic, omnivorous consumption patterns. Yet, previous research has tended to document rather than explain omnivorousness. The present research therefore aims to provide with a fuller account of omnivorousness, by centering on what I term as the “simple taste.” My premise is that simplicity is a social construct and not “inherent to the food itself” (Johnston and Baumann 2010: 76). The “simple taste,” as inferred from the culinary preferences of the couples and caterers, is a set of aesthetic sensibilities, emotional rules and moral judgments. I analyze this classificatory system below to show the ways new middle class Israelis talk and experience food as part of their social interactions, identity work and boundary-making. I contend that this taste enables them to navigate safely between two conflicting cultural strategies—elitism and pluralism—and in so doing it also bridges between obligations to one’s self and to others. As such, the “simple taste”
Meneley 2007: 596). Adjectives such as “extravagant,” “prestigious,” “distinguished” or “elegant” conveyed negative meanings. Instead, chefs used nebulous terms such as “quality,” “fresh,” “genuine,” “authentic,” “warm,” “true,” “special,” “honest,” “delicious,” “natural” and above all—“simple,” thereby evoking a terroir rhetoric (Beer 2008; Brooks 2000; Harris 2000:153–208). As one caterer said: “the whole idea is that the food is fresh, based on quality, fine ingredients. Very simple.” In the words of another:

We use quality, yet unsophisticated ingredients. We don’t do twenty variations of the same cabbage and carrots salad … You can set up a buffet with not even a single kind of salad [but] with cold asparagus, pickled pears in two dressings (almonds, crème and lemon, or olive oil). You might also include a few, top quality goat cheeses. You might also want to have one or two kinds of antipasti, good breads and a green salad and that’s it … Fresh, cooked on location ravioli and fettuccini … all of our salads are diced on location … This is what I mean by “simple.” I don’t need twenty variations of illogical combinations. Just a nice vegetable with the right kind of seasoning, a good cheese, and a top quality olive oil, the best you can get in the market.

Culinary connoisseurship was thus constructed by stressing neoartisanal techne (Heath and Meneley 2007), in the sense of fine, regional ingredients and traditional or more natural cooking methods. For example: “we are turning inward. It stems from life itself. The falafel is the best in the world. The food is whole food. The chicken must be of the highest quality so that the taste would be in the right texture.”

Interestingly, some chefs offered a highly eclectic version of the local, regional food trend. For example, one chef predicted that “the next trend would focus on menu composition rather than the dish itself. Hummus with edible rice papers and different combinations … Lafah13 filled with rice. Israeli sushi.” These eclectic menus were given a local, even national makeup and they too were nevertheless constructed as natural and wholesome, coming “from real love for what it is that you are doing. From a deep connection with the soil.” The terroir rhetoric of “boutique agriculture” (cited in Heath and Meneley 2007) should not hide the fact that the natural simplicity of high-quality ingredients is actually quite costly. Material differences are still at work in cultural distinctions, even when disguised as environmental.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article’s objectives were twofold: to identify the classificatory schemes of new middle class omnivores, and to place omnivorousness in the Israeli context. Unlike most research, I presupposed that a wedding and its food are not merely intersection points of global and local forces. Instead, I focused on the production and consumption of food at weddings as a locus of class distinctions, where class tastes are formed, manifested and reproduced. In line with the scholarship on food omnivorousness, the menus I examined showed openness towards “other” cuisines:
“simple” culinary taste, consumers and producers alike were able to convey a bourgeois self-identity and be recognized as such. A closely related conclusion is that class-based distinctions now work through individualization itself. Presumably, the “simple taste” can be said to express a more general preference of “simplicity to luxury, authentic taste and natural foods to artificial refinement” (Meyer 2000: 48). Similarly, Fox states that presently “there is a premium on elegant simplicity: the original and unusual combination of simple elements. Thus, entertaining has become livelier, more expressive of personal style and flair, more creative, and undoubtedly more enjoyable” (Fox 2003: 8). Meyer and Fox see simplicity as a democratic, pluralistic and inclusive taste, countering an elitist, highbrow refinement. Unlike them, I see my informants’ quest for simplicity as part of the new, classed taste regime of omnivorousness rather than a sign of classless individualization.

Despite a wide scholarly presumption that lifestyles no longer demarcate class boundaries, class still counts in Western societies, yet it manifests itself in ways that appear highly individualistic. Monopolizing culture and making it part of one’s self-identity (in the form of personal tastes and lifestyles) is an essentially middle class project of self-realization (Bottero 2004; Lawler 2005; Skeggs 2004a, 2004b). As post-Bourdieuian scholarship has established, in today’s postmodern era omnivorousness has replaced cultural elitism—a new middle class way to monopolize culture. In this context, I argue, one of the mechanisms that makes individualization classed. The “simple taste” is one example of this dynamic. Monopolizing class boundaries in a new way, by relying on personal, authentic choices, I contend that these individualized tastes coincide with a highly classed neoliberal discourse.

The prevailing neoliberal discourse typically frames “diversity” and “authenticity” as competitive knowhow, as market assets (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001). Rhetoric notwithstanding, not everyone possesses the capacities to choose, assemble or mobilize culture “authentically,” but omnivores do. For example, in the weddings I studied, omnivores could see the hidden quality or beauty of otherwise basic, mundane items. Furthermore, because these items were deemed simple and worthy of the omnivores’ appreciation, they become culturally valuable. The new middle class thus has the ability to reveal new cultural items—and mainstream them. Moreover, inasmuch as working life now entails performing a strong self-identity (Fleming 2009), being identified as a cultural transgressor may help reproduce the cultural and social domination of an entitled new middle class (Prieur et al. 2008: 63; Skeggs 2004b).

Simplicity, understood as lavishness devoid of extravagance, enabled consumers to conform to bourgeois codes of sociability. The ownership of a unique taste as a mark of humanity itself is essentially a middle class project (Lawler 2005). Contemporary middle class personhood is all the more predicated on accomplished performances of choice-based individuality. The new middle class is compelled to be different (Matusov and Smith 2012; Skeggs 2004a, 2004b). However, too much individuality might be seen as presumptuous and elitist. This is true not only in regards to close-knit Israeli society, but also in regards to bourgeois respectability