

Obituary

George E. Johnson (1940–2010)

George Johnson, who spent many years as Professor of Economics at the University of Michigan, died in the spring of 2010. A man of big appetites, and a fine cook, he was known mainly for his scholarly work in the economics of labor markets. But he was also one of the pioneers in the economic analysis of restaurants and food.

Johnson earned his Ph.D. degree in economics at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid 1960s. A native of Massachusetts, perhaps better known for its baked beans than its country pâté, the Berkeley food scene was just becoming home to a passionate interest in food quality when George Johnson passed through it. The effect stuck. Like many fine cooks, Johnson thought wine was only a useful addendum to a meal; that is, Cahors was a complement, not a substitute, for cassoulet.

Perhaps Johnson's best known and most lasting contribution to the world of food economics was his paper, "*Petit Déjeuner Compris*" – *Is It Really Free? Evidence from French and Italian Hotels*. The paper established with a remarkably complete empirical analysis that there really is no such thing as a free breakfast, despite the wishful thinking of some consumers. As Johnson summarized his findings,

"Despite the old claim in economics that 'there is no such thing as a free lunch,' some of the recent work in behavioral economics implies the contrary. In this paper I study whether French and Italian hotels actually provide a 'free' breakfast when, as is done by many hotels around the world, its provision is included in the room price. The data indicate, using both cross-sectional comparisons and hotel-specific changes in breakfast provision, that there is no such thing as a free breakfast. In France and Italy hotels that offer, respectively, 'petit déjeuner compris' and 'compresa la prima colazione' appear to raise their room prices by 10 to 15 percent."

Johnson's paper was published in the *Journal of Wine Economics* in the spring of 2007 and it was awarded the coveted "Rabelais Prize" when it was presented at the joint meetings of the American Association of Wine Economists, the Association of Food Economists, and the Vineyard Data Quantification Society in Trier in May of 2007. Johnson served on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Wine Economics* until his death. His good humor and rigorous research will be missed.

Orley Ashenfelter
Princeton University