

E JOURNAL USA

U.S. SOCIETY & VALUES

JULY 2004

The central image features a collection of kitchen items: a large copper-colored pot with a lid, a smaller copper-colored pan with a lid, a wooden knife block containing several knives, and a silver fork and knife. These items are arranged over a grid of various restaurant advertisements, including 'SUSHI BAR TERIYAKI', 'THE CRAB', 'CHEF ANDRE RESTAURANT', 'CHICKEN OUT ROTISSERIE', and 'ORIGINAL CRAB HOUSE'.

AMERICANS AT THE TABLE

REFLECTIONS ON FOOD AND CULTURE

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

“TELL ME WHAT YOU EAT, AND
I WILL TELL YOU WHAT YOU ARE.”

JEAN ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN

Brillat-Savarin, the French lawyer, politician, and author of such classic writings on food as *The Physiology of Taste*, spent two years in the United States during the French Revolution. The contemporary version of his famous thought has become a popular expression in America: “You are what you eat” is a phrase open to a variety of interpretations. In the pages that follow we examine how Americans prepare and consume food and what these traditions reveal about our culture. In a sense we are parsing out the literal implications of Brillat-Savarin’s maxim – using food as a way to understand the deepest values of those living in the United States today.

One of the most striking things about any discussion of American culinary customs is how quickly the trail leads beyond the borders of this country. The United States is a rich and varied blend of races, religions, and ethnicities, and this diversity is reflected in our cuisine. Our eating habits have much to tell about our nation’s social, cultural, economic, and demographic history. While we have never developed a national cuisine in the same sense as some older nations, the early immigrants from England and Central Europe brought a meat and potato fare that is still found on millions of American tables every day. Pot roast, mashed potatoes, various incarnations of ground meat (including meatloaf, hamburger, sausages, and the quintessential American hot dog) and noodle dishes such as macaroni and cheese, as well as breads, bagels, pickles, and cabbage slaws, are all modern-day descendants of dishes that graced the tables of our German, Polish, and Jewish ancestors in middle Europe.

The pervasiveness of meat and potatoes on the American table, however, did not stop the emergence of distinct regional cuisines, which often combined unique (and sometimes new) regional ingredients with the particular culinary traditions of a dominant immigrant

group. French Acadians who immigrated to Louisiana used the crayfish in the bayous as a key ingredient in what came to be called “Cajun” cooking; German immigrants settling in the grain-rich farm country of Wisconsin established a beer and bratwurst culture in the upper Midwest; and plentiful blue crabs in Maryland, clams on Cape Cod, and lobster in Maine provided English settlers with victuals that are still popular nearly four centuries later.

Succeeding waves of immigrants, including those arriving on our shores today, have brought new culinary traditions and adapted them to the ingredients, kitchens, and customs they found in their new homeland—ever expanding what we call “American food.” The evolution of American food is very much like the continually changing face of America—a work in progress.

Regular readers of our electronic journals are aware that our usual approach is to provide information and context on U.S. government policies on many contemporary international issues. In early editorial discussions for this journal, we considered that approach – for example, articles on how America feeds its poor, U.S. food distribution programs around the world, the debate over genetically modified foods – but in the end we decided that these worthy topics should be the subject of a different journal at a different time. We believe that this journal will give readers some important and special insights into American life and values and, in doing so, perhaps touch a common chord with other cultures. As the late America food writer James A. Beard once put it, “Food is our common ground, a universal experience.”

In celebrating America’s amazing culinary diversity, we celebrate America’s diversity per se. In our opening essay, author David Rosengarten describes, using the examples of Italian and Chinese cuisine, how the United

States draws upon the traditional cooking of its many different immigrant groups to create a unique, vibrant, and ever-changing culinary scene. Next, three authors from widely different backgrounds provide insightful and nostalgic reflections on that most American of holidays, Thanksgiving, the celebration of which culminates around the dinner table. Other articles explore the origins and preparation of such uniquely American foods as barbecue, iced tea, and sandwiches—many of which have come to epitomize the character and personality of certain American cities and regions, and are sources of enormous pride to the people who prepare and consume them. We also include some information on how

Americans are coping with a problem related to our bounty—obesity. Finally, we include some light notes in the form of a glossary of American food idioms.

We hope that as you read these articles, you will be informed as well as amused. Most of all, however, we hope that through these pages you will gain new insights into the American character and a greater understanding of U.S. society and values as reflected in our culinary heritage.

—The Editors



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / JULY 2004 / VOLUME 9 / NUMBER 1

U.S. SOCIETY & VALUES

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

- 6 We Are What We Eat: We are a Nation of Immigrants!**
DAVID ROSENGARTEN
American cuisine is a rich mixture of many different sources and traditions. A sidebar—**The World Supermarket**—briefly highlights the origin and spread of common foods around the globe

CELEBRATIONS OF THANKSGIVING

- 10 LIFE ON A TURKEY FARM**
NEIL KLOPFENSTEIN
Hard work and family values were byproducts of farm life.
- 13 Cuban Seasonings**
ANA MENENDEZ
An immigrant family eagerly adopted America's quintessential holiday and made it conform to their own tastes.
- 16 A Marriage of Contrasting Traditions**
APRIL REYNOLDS
The author had to modify her traditional African-American, Southern turkey dinner when she moved north to study and then later married into an Italian family.

FROM KITCHEN TO TABLE

- 19 The Taste Setters**
MICHAEL BANDLER AND STEVEN LAUTERBACH
The seven individuals profiled demonstrate the influence that famous chefs have had on the American diet.
- 24 Long Journey Over Open Coals**
SYLVIA LOVEGREN
American barbecue takes hours to prepare, but it is well worth the wait.

27 Include Me Out—A Reflection on "Ice Tea"

FRED CHAPPELL
North Carolina's Poet Laureate takes a humorous look at a classic American beverage, iced tea.

29 Knives & Forks

FRANCINE PROSE
The author expresses appreciation for the variety of ways in which people eat and what it says about the way we live. A sidebar—**Why do They Eat that Way?**—explains America's "zigzag" method.

32 Sandwich Pride

BY ED LEVINE
A well-known food writer provides a culinary tour of America's sandwiches.

35 The Fat of the Land: America Confronts Its Weight Problem

MICHAEL JAY FRIEDMAN
Americans, more overweight than ever, realize they must eat less and exercise more. They also have a plethora of eating guides to consult, as the sidebar **Diets: A Bewildering Variety** illustrates.

SOME ADDED INGREDIENTS

38 Is That Really a Restaurant?

A nostalgic look at restaurants that took the shape of the food they served.

39 As American as... Apple Pie

Here is how to bake the dessert that often is said to epitomize the United States.

40 Food Talk

For speakers of English, what you say is often what you eat.

41 Bibliography

43 Internet Resources



**U.S. SOCIETY &
VALUES**



Editor.....Steven Lauterbach
Managing Editor.....Neil Klopfenstein
Associate Editor.....Michael J. Bandler
Associate Editors, Reference/ResearchMary Ann V. Gamble
.....Kathy Spiegel
Photo Editor.....Barry Fitzgerald

Publisher.....Judith S. Siegel
Executive Editor.....Guy E. Olson
Production Manager.....Christian Larson
Assistant Production Manager.....Sylvia Scott

Editorial Board

George Clack Kathleen R. Davis Francis B. Ward

The Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State publishes five electronic journals—Economic Perspectives, Global Issues, Issues of Democracy, U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda, and U.S. Society & Values—that examine major issues facing the United States and the international community as well as U.S. society, values, thought, and institutions. Each of the five is catalogued by volume (the number of years in publication) and by number (the number of issues that appear during the year).

One new journal is published monthly in English and is followed two to four weeks later by versions in French, Portuguese, and Spanish. Selected editions also appear in Arabic and Russian.

The opinions expressed in the journals do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government. The U.S. Department of State assumes no responsibility for the content and continued accessibility of Internet sites to which the journals link; such responsibility resides solely with the publishers of those sites. Journal articles, photographs, and illustrations may be reproduced and translated outside the United States unless they carry explicit copyright restrictions, in which case permission must be sought from the copyright holders noted in the journal.

The Bureau of International Information Programs maintains current and back issues in several electronic formats, as well as a list of upcoming journals, at <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/journals.htm>. Comments are welcome at your local U.S. Embassy or at the editorial offices: Editor, eJournal USA: U.S. Society & Values / IIP/IT/SV / U.S. Department of State 301 4th St. S.W. / Washington, D.C. 20547 / United States of America E-mail: ejvalues@state.gov

WE ARE WHAT WE EAT: WE ARE A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS!

DAVID ROSENGARTEN

Numerous influences have affected the development of cuisine in the United States. Native Americans are credited with making corn a major ingredient in the national diet. Early immigrants from China and Italy, as well as slaves from Africa, all contributed to the development of foods that Americans commonly eat today. The absence of royalty, a motivating force for culinary inventiveness in other countries, such as France and China, coupled with the "stoic, utilitarian sensibility" of the Puritan Ethic, may have hindered development of fine cuisine during the country's early decades, but adoption and adaptation of dishes brought by new waves of immigrants over the decades have sparked a richness and diversity in the fare on America's dinner tables and in its restaurants.

David Rosengarten is an authority on food, wine, and cooking, and the author of the award-winning cookbook, Taste. He is a frequent host on the Food Network, a cable channel shown around the world, and producer of the Rosengarten Report, a newsletter about food.

American food has been woefully misunderstood around the world by those who view it from a distance only. "Americans eat hamburgers, no?" would be the typical perspective overseas on what Americans consume—and it wouldn't be wrong! We do love our hamburgers, and our hot dogs, and other simple, emblematic treats. However, we love many other things as well. And with ever-growing good reason. For the vast patchwork of comestibles that is "American" cooking today is one of the most vital cuisines in the world, owing its vitality, in large part, to the same element that built the strength of America in other ways—the arrival on these shores of immigrants from virtually all over the globe, immigrants who were able to combine the talents and perspectives they brought from other countries with the day-to-day realities and logistics of American life. Finally, today, food-savvy people everywhere are recognizing the high quality of what's now being cooked in America—but it took many years for that level of quality, and that recognition, to develop.

Why? Well, truth be told, the deck has historically been stacked against gastronomic America.

For starters, the Native Americans, the long-time inhabitants of this continent who established their American civilization well before the first Europeans arrived, were not ideally positioned to begin building a national cuisine. The very size of this country, and the spread-out nature of Native-American culture, militated against culinary progress, which is so dependent on the cross-fertilization of ideas. In old France, for example, a culinary idea could blow into Paris with the weekly mail from Lyon—but the likelihood of culinary ideas from the Seminoles in Florida and the Pueblos in the Rocky Mountains merging into something national was far more remote. The absence of great cities in the

landscape of the Native Americans also worked against gastronomic development—because time has proven that the rubbing of shoulders in a large urban environment is beneficial to the rise of great cooking.

Additionally, American cooking always lacked the motivating drive of royalty (which is part of our national charm!). Cuisines in France, in Italy, in Spain, in Persia, in northern India, in Thailand, in China were all heavily inspired by the necessity of creating "national" food for the royal court. This not only unified the cooking in those countries, but also boosted its complexities—as chefs attempted to outdo each other in pursuit of royal approval. Though the masses in 1788 certainly were not eating what Louis XVI ate (as his famous wife acknowledged in her most famous utterance), the cooking ideas and dishes that developed at Versailles and other royal venues over many centuries were later incorporated into what every Frenchman eats everywhere in France.

PERVASIVENESS OF CORN

Lacking such a galvanizing force, before the European arrivals American food never merged into a unified coast-to-coast phenomenon. Of course, the Native Americans made major ingredient contributions to what we eat today, particularly corn. It's fascinating to think that so many things that we do consider part of our national gastronomic life—such as corn on the cob, creamed corn, corn dogs, corn flakes, grits, tortilla chips, even our cheap American beer brewed from corn—are grounded in this ingredient preference of the early Native Americans. But did that preference lead to a "national cuisine?" By looking at neighboring Mexico—where it did lead to one—I think we can see that the answer is "no." The Spaniards who started arriving in Mexico in the 16th century didn't merely grab a good ingredient and do something else with it; they truly blended their ideas with the Native Mexican Indian ideas. Tacos al carbon? The Spaniards brought the pork; the Indians supplied the tacos. When you eat in Mexico today, you'll find every table laid with modern versions of Indian ingredients, and Indian culinary ideas for those ingredients. You cannot say the same about the modern American table.

Later in America, other factors, deeply grounded in the modern American spirit, further conspired to stall a national culinary growth. When the Europeans first arrived, the battle for sustenance of any kind was the motif that informed the kitchen, not the quest for creativity; you cannot be inventing a grand cuisine when you're worried about which tree bark might be edible so

that you can survive another day. Picture the French citizen in 1607 in Paris—grounded, entrenched, ready to inherit a cooking tradition and help it evolve. Now picture the Jamestown inhabitant, starting from scratch, permanently preoccupied with more elemental concerns.

Of course, as American civilization grew, the pioneer spirit played its own role in the delay of culinary refinement. "There's a ridge over there—we've got to see what's beyond it." And, indeed, there were many ridges between Virginia and California. Not all Americans were moving across the country in stage coaches during the 18th and 19th centuries—but the still-extant flavor of American restlessness, of American exploration, of a kind of life at odds with the "our family has been sitting near this hearth for 400 years" mentality of Europeans of the same day, once again cut against the set of values and interests that normally lead to the development of great cuisine.

SOME QUIRKY ASPECTS

It is this spirit, of course—an ethos of "eating to live" rather than "living to eat"—that has led to other quirky aspects of the traditional American food world. We have certainly led the planet in the development of "convenience" foods—both because we have had the technological ingenuity to do so, but also because we have so many citizens who "don't have time to cook." Let's face it—rice that cooks in a minute, or soup that only needs a minute in the microwave, is not going to play a role in the development of American haute cuisine.

Lastly, it has been the poor fortune of gastronomic America to have fallen under the sway, for so many years, of a mainstream American value system—the so-called Puritan Ethic. A great deal of industry and good has arisen from this set of values—but no one can ever accuse the Puritans and their descendants of fomenting the positive development of the arts, particularly the culinary arts. I remember older people in my youth—this breed is mostly gone now—who considered it grossly impolite to talk about food, even at the dinner table. You received your sustenance and you ingested it, so that you could live another day. Why would any right-thinking person discuss the way something tastes, other than for reasons of vanity? And so it played out, for hundreds of years, in New England and elsewhere—a stoic, utilitarian sensibility at the table, hardly conducive to the development of fine cuisine.

Had this nation stalled after the influx of the original Europeans in the 17th and 18th century, our culinary story may have stalled as well. However, shortly after this

period, other immigrants began to arrive—and it is to these groups that we owe the rescue of the American palate, as well as the honing of the American palate into one of the finest culinary instruments in the world today.

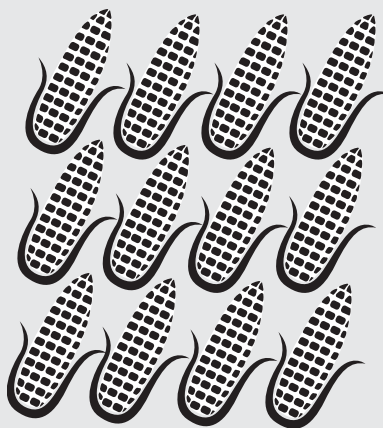
One of our greatest national disgraces ever was also the source of many of our nation's early gastronomic triumphs: the awful transformation of free African citizens into bound American slaves. From that tragedy, however, arose a strong sensibility that had a powerful influence on the development of American culture—not to mention American cuisine. The Africans brought intriguing ingredients with them to these shores—okra, yams, peanuts (which originated in Peru, then came to North America from Africa). They dined "low on the hog"—with the slave owners taking the best parts of the pig, and the slaves left to their ingenuity to make the leftover parts tasty. And, they had a natural camaraderie with slaves who arrived from the Caribbean—who brought to this country a whole new set of spices that added tremendous zest to American cooking. The slaves and former slaves were on the scene in Charleston, South Carolina, as that city became a major spice-trading port. They were there in New Orleans, aiding in the development of one of America's most distinct regional cuisines. And they manned barbecue—or BBQ—pits all over the South, helping to develop what I surely believe to be America's most significant contribution to world cuisine.

If all of that early gastronomic activity was generated by immigrants coming in through the Southeast, a parallel activity was occurring in the Southwest—where Mexican Indians and Spanish settlers

The WORLD SUPERMARKET

In today's world economy, it may be hard to imagine that many staples in the international diet were once completely unknown on one side of the globe or another prior to the European discovery of the American continent in the late 15th century. For example, potatoes, first cultivated in the Andes Mountains in South America, were brought to Europe by Spanish explorers. Pineapples also originated in South America and were taken by Spanish and Portuguese explorers to tropical areas throughout the world, including Africa and Asia.

Food moved in the other direction as well. Lettuce and broccoli, which originated in Europe, are now grown extensively in the Americas, including the United States. The peanut, also called a groundnut, is a legume that moved in both directions. Peanuts were first cultivated in South America and brought to Europe and North Africa by Spanish and Portuguese traders. From there, it was later introduced to North America. Today, people worldwide regularly consume food items that originated in many different areas around the globe. Among other foods that originated in the Americas are: beans, cocoa, corn (maize), gourds, peppers, pumpkins, squash, strawberries, and tomatoes.



were bringing their flavors up through Mexico to Texas and New Mexico. What we ended up with in our own American Southwest was not very like what the original immigrants ate in Mexico, or in Spain—but it became a crucial element in our national dining picture, with enchiladas and fajitas as truly American as any other dish eaten every day across America.

CHINESE AND ITALIAN DOMINANCE

By the latter half of the 19th century, the stage was set for the most important period of gastro-immigration in American history—when the Chinese immigrants and the Italian immigrants arrived. I call it supremely important, for if you go to any American city today, and open the phone book to check on the restaurants, you will find that Chinese restaurants and Italian restaurants, despite the rise in popularity of many other ethnic cuisines, still dominate the restaurant culture.

Chinese food in America, of course, has a secondary position behind Italian. It came to this country with the Chinese immigrants who arrived to work on the railroad in the West—or, rather, who came to feed those who were working on the railroad. The cooks didn't have much to work with, but they imaginatively threw together little bits of meat and vegetables in their large pans and gave it a name: chop suey. As this type of cooking hit the big cities, and spread across the country, a whole new cuisine emerged: Chinese-American, replete with Egg Rolls, Wonton Soup, Fried Rice, Chicken Chow Mein, and Spare Ribs. It never had quite the reach of the Italian-American food that was spawned a little bit later—because, though

most Americans ate this food, they didn't usually try to cook it at home. However, it did accomplish something extremely significant—it opened up the minds and palates of almost every 20th-century American to the exotic allure of Asian food, paving the way for the absorption of many Asian cuisines into our national eating habits.

A bit later came the big one: Italian-American food. Around 1880, the first wave began—immigrants from Naples, arriving at Ellis Island. Before long, they were living around Mulberry Street in Manhattan, where they desperately tried to reproduce the food of their homeland. They failed, because they could not obtain the ingredients that they used back in the old country. Through sheer ingenuity, however, they made do with what they had. So what if the new dishes used dried herbs instead of fresh, canned tomatoes instead of fresh, more sauce on the pasta than is traditional, and more meat in the diet? The Italian-American cuisine that they created was magnificent—though, if you were born after 1975, you'd never know it, because the best "Italian" chefs in America today eschew Italian-American cuisine, preferring to climb ever-higher mountains of radicchio, anointed with ever-older bottles of balsamic vinegar.

But the real triumph of the cuisine is in the American home—where pizza, lasagna, manicotti, meatballs, veal parmigiana, through frozen food, or delivery food, or home cookin', or routine items such as hot dogs and hamburgers play a tremendously vital role in the everyday fare of Americans. And, I daresay, what we learned from Italian-American food is extremely important—that food with origins in another country can not only become an interesting diversion here, but solidly part of our mainstream fare.

THE NEW IMMIGRATION

This got proved again and again. The rest of the 20th century saw the arrival of multiple immigrant groups—and, with a national palate "softened up" by the twin triumphs of Chinese-American cuisine and Italian-American cuisine, the gradual acceptance of many ethnic

cuisines into our everyday lives. Though the immigration to America of such European groups as Greeks and French and Scandinavians, for example, was not in numbers approaching the Italian immigration, we still find gyro and souvlaki and shish kebab stands on many an urban corner, we still celebrate the French way of approaching food as a cornerstone of our American kitchen, and we still give Danish pastry a solid position in the world of the American breakfast.

Beyond Europe, foods from the rest of the world too have merged into the American menu. Has any restaurant type, after the pizza parlor, conquered our cities as the sushi bar has in recent years? Have you noticed, of late, the rapid rise of South American grilling restaurants, with Brazilian churrascarias and Argentine parrilladas paving the way? And what of the smaller-than-a-movement but bigger-than-a-quirk ethnic eateries of all descriptions that are mushrooming—from Afghan kebab houses to Korean BBQs, from Ethiopian injera joints to Cuban pork places, from Indian curry parlors to Thai noodle houses?

But that's not all, in gastronomic America. What's especially compelling about all of this gastronomic activity on these shores is the "melting pot" factor. Yes, at the neighborhood ethnic spots, Thai food doesn't fuse with Cuban, Polish cuisine doesn't get hitched to Philippine. But let an American take home from the Thai restaurant a taste for coconut milk in stews, and before long—helped by the extraordinary boom in grocery availability—she's combining Uncle George's Hungarian paprikash with Thai red curry. And at the higher levels of cooking, this kind of cross-fertilization goes on at an even more furious pace—with high-profile American chefs raiding the culinary stockpiles of scores of ethnic cuisines from around the world, creating, night after night, hybridized gastronomic flings that the world has never seen before. It is, in America, always a transformative process.....and what always comes out is always American food. ■