

The Dream of the Masses for a Rich Diet is Realized

Crossroads of the Food Cultures of the World A Personal Record of American Food Culture (part 2)

Mark Twain and the Japanese Envoy

Within one hundred years of the Declaration of Independence, signed in 1776, the United States had avoided national division and overcome the crisis of the Civil War, extended her territory west as far as California, gained possession of Alaska, and was completing the railroad that crossed the entire country. By 1890, the systematic resistance to U.S. control by Native Americans had been defeated and new frontiers had all but disappeared. With the second half of the 19th century, industries developed at a remarkable pace, and monopolistic capitalists became extremely



Member of the first Japanese delegation to the U.S., Yukichi Fukuzawa (property of The National Diet Library)

successful, amassing immense fortunes under the banner of free competition.

In striking contrast, however, the poverty of the ever increasing numbers of laborers in the city was growing. Dreaming the American dream of ready wealth, immigrants continued to pour into the United States. American society was on the verge of great change.

Summary of the article, *Signs of a Food Culture More Than 20,000 Years Ago*, presented in FOOD CULTURE No. 8

The United States of America is made up of immigrants from the world over. The English settled in the northeast region now known as New England. Initially facing starvation, the Pilgrims received assistance from Native Americans and developed a new American food culture using indigenous food products. The French settled the southeast and built New Orleans. They also developed a unique food culture that combines traditional French methods of preparation with indigenous products. The Germans who settled the Pennsylvania region are known for the economy, variety, and quantity in their cooking, which include dishes made from unused meat scraps, pickles, and pies.

Following the American War for Independence (Revolutionary War) French gourmets of the time described the abundance of food and the individual food culture of the United States at that time as the best in the world. With the popularity of haute cuisine, proliferated by Paris chefs at the beginning of the 19th century, a disdain for overeating was born. This disdain gave rise to the first "health foods".

At the same time, westward expansion had begun in earnest. The pioneers and cowboys required food that was easily transported and simple to prepare and eat on the trail. This is thought to be the source of today's fast-food culture.



Hiroko Kato

Ms. Kato was born in Tokyo in 1970 and graduated from Waseda University's School of Political Science and Economics in 1993. In the same year, Ms. Kato began working in the editorial department for the women's monthly magazine, LEE, published by Shueisha. In 1999 Ms. Kato quit her job and began working as a freelance journalist in the field of lifestyle and culture.

Ms. Kato visited Maryland in the United States and became a member of The Vegetarian Resource Group. She then wrote articles covering the conditions, eating habits, and health benefits of American vegetarians. Since returning to Japan, Ms. Kato has been working in Japanese-American media and authored such works as *Sushi Purizu! Amerikajin Sushi wo Kuu*, Shueisha 2002; *"Shakitto Itameru" wo Eigo de Iu to*, Gentosha 2002; and *Taberu Amerikajin*, Taishukan Shoten 2003.

Japan had also entered a tumultuous time and a period of cooperation between the two countries began. Commodore Perry arrived in Japan in 1853, just before the Civil War began in the U.S. The Treaty of Peace and Amity between the United States and the Empire of Japan was signed the following year, and a trade agreement between Japan and the U.S. was signed in 1858. In 1860, a Japanese delegation was sent from Japan on the ship *Kanrin Maru* to ratify treaties between the two nations. The delegates, dressed in their traditional costumes, hair done up in topknots, and carrying their swords, received a warm welcome wherever they went.

Yukichi Fukuzawa, who accompanied the delegation, wrote in his autobiography about his experiences in the U.S., including his surprise, bordering on fear, at the sound produced when a bottle of champagne was opened, his astonishment at finding ice in March and April, his appreciation of the warm receptions held for the delegates where he could witness the full extent of the rich food culture enjoyed by Americans. Having the occasion to accept an invitation to someone's house, Fukuzawa commented that he felt like he had stepped into a frightening fairy tale when he saw a complete baby pig roasting on a spit. To the Japanese, who were still restricted by government bans and social taboos from eating meat, this must surely have been a shock.

While traveling in Europe in 1867, American author Mark Twain began to miss the foods he was used to and made a list of sixty dishes he wanted to eat. The list included Virginia bacon, soft-shell crab, Philadelphia

turtle soup, Connecticut fish, Baltimore duck, salted butter, corn, asparagus, kidney beans, and apple pie. It is easy to imagine Twain daydreaming about these simple yet incredibly delicious dishes and “good old American food”.

Changes Brought About by the Civil War

American food culture saw a variety of changes prior to and after the Civil War (1861–1865). One of these changes was in the preservation method known as canning.



Painting depicting the battle at Gettysburg in 1863 (©The Granger Collection, New York/PPS)

The canning method was developed in Europe during the first half of the 19th century, and the first cannery was established in the United States by English immigrants in Boston in 1821. During the Civil War, benefits for both transport and storage offered by the canned foods that served as valuable soldier rations became widely appreciated. Soldiers from both sides returned home praising the convenience and excellent flavor of the canned pork and beans, oysters, and string beans manufactured for the Union Army, and canned meat and vegetable stew manufactured for the Confederate Army.

With so many praising the qualities of canned foods, demand increased rapidly. Within a very short time, a variety of canned foods including corn, baked beans, squash, and sweet potatoes became common in kitchens throughout the country and an indispensable part of American home cooking.

By the end of the 19th century, Joseph Campbell, founder of Campbell's Soup, had succeeded in automating the canning



Joseph Campbell increased the efficiency of the canning process, forever changing American food culture.

process and developing better can production methods, making the U.S. the world leader in the canning industry. The popularity of canned foods forever changed the American food culture and opened the door for new processes in food manufacturing and packaging. Other products for which demand increased before and after the Civil War include ketchup, Tabasco sauce, condensed milk, and evaporated milk. These products came to be popular not only in the U.S., but around the world.

Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad and the Distribution Revolution

Another important change in the American diet that occurred after the Civil War is the distribution of beef. When people first began immigrating to North America, more than half of the immigrants were English. It was not until 1624 that they were able to get their first taste of beef since leaving England, when cattle were first brought from England to the Americas. Until that time, the people had satisfied their desire for meat with pork and chicken. Pork had been and continued to be the meat mainstay of the American diet. All of this changed, however, with completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.



The Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads meet at Promontory Point in 1869, completing the first transcontinental railroad (©The Granger Collection, New York/PPS)

As western expansion and settlement increased beginning in the 1830s, hunting of the forty million buffalo that inhabited the Great Plains of the mid-west flourished. By the end of the 19th century, however, the buffalo had all but disappeared due to over-hunting and development of their habitat with construction of the transcontinental railroad. This was a tremendous loss, and is even considered one of the reasons the American government was finally able to defeat the Native Americans of the region who depended on the buffalo for not only food, but also clothing, shelter, and fuel.

On the other hand, the Spanish had brought Longhorn cattle to Texas during the 16th century, and at the time of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–1848), some 300,000 head of Longhorn cattle were running wild. This number had increased to approximately five million at the time of the Civil War. To compensate for the near extinction of the buffalo, cowboys moved between four and five million of the Longhorns north from Texas between 1867 and 1887. After that, the Longhorns were bred with other European varieties of cattle and the American beef industry prospered. It was during the 1880s that Americans came to love that most typical of American foods, the giant steak.



A common ingredient in modern American meals—the giant steak

The transcontinental railroad distributed not only cattle, but also fruits and vegetables. The development of the ice-production industry beginning in 1860 made it possible to refrigerate locomotive cars. Such refrigerated transport allowed canneries to purchase fruits and vegetables in large quantities directly from the fields and orchards, transport them to the canneries, process and can them, and finally distribute the canned products over great distances. In this way, canned food was almost magical as it allowed people ready and constant access to fruits and vegetables, regardless of the season.

The Breakfast Cereal Revolution

In addition to changes in the American diet brought about by the introduction and proliferation of canned goods, there was another industrial commodity that sparked a revolution in American eating habits at this time, especially to breakfast. The product was breakfast cereal and its instant and enduring popularity is due to the promotion of the Kellogg brothers.

John Harvey Kellogg, the elder of the two brothers and staff physician at the Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan, was a surgeon and an Adventist, a Christian sect that advocated a vegetarian diet and opposed alcohol. Many celebrities of the time, including Henry Ford and President Taft, received treatment at the sanitarium. In addition to

hot spring treatments, Kellogg prescribed a balanced lifestyle of fresh air, vigorous exercise, and healthy food including fruit, yogurt, and cereals. In his passionate pursuit of a health food diet, Kellogg stumbled upon a toasted flakes product, predecessor to the popular corn flakes we know today, in 1894. Kellogg found a flour dough that had been left out for two days. When he attempted to roll it out, the dried-up dough began to flake. Kellogg roasted the flakes over a flame and gave them to sanitarium patients to eat. The toasted flakes were quite a hit! In 1898, Kellogg began producing and selling corn flakes. His younger brother William, who assisted him with his health food sales, added sugar to corn flakes and the product was an immediate success. Sales were further increased when William began advertising corn flakes nationally. At a time when sanitariums were considered trendy, cereal became a health food that attracted the middle class. Consumers also appreciated the fact that it came in a sealed box, making it a “hygienic” food product. With the growing popularity of cold cereals, hot cereals began to make their appearance. Oatmeal had been a mainstay of the diet in Europe since medieval times and was also common in the U.S. It didn’t become a consumer good, however, until the 1870s when Ferdinand Schumacher, a German immigrant and owner of a small grocery store, began selling it. Soon after, Henry Parsons Crowell established the Quaker Oats brand and became the leading manufacturer and retailer of oatmeal not only in the U.S., but throughout the world.

A food that could be eaten immediately, cereal became the standard American breakfast during the last twenty years of the 19th century. Breakfast cereal was first accepted in the cities, and primarily by housewives. Used to spending up to an hour and a half preparing breakfasts of hot biscuits and sausages for their husbands and children, these women greatly appreciated the extra time that breakfasts of cereal allowed them.

The Light and Dark of The Gilded Age

Mark Twain criticized the period between the end of the Civil War and the end of the 19th century in his novel, *The Gilded Age*. The book symbolizes America’s apparent fascination with the vulgar and captivation with material things during this period. Society at this time bore almost no resemblance to the simple and frugal ways of the Puritans who helped to found the nation. Developing industries were creating a new wealthy class that valued luxury and magnificence over simplicity and economy. This wealthy class did not partake of the standard American diet based on English tradition, but rather imported extravagant French cuisine. Only in their breakfasts did they deviate from this standard. Rather than simple French breakfasts of bread and coffee or tea, they enjoyed huge breakfasts of steak and other items in vast quantities.

Though they did not necessarily aspire to the extravagance of the upper class, even the middle class held dinner parties. The menus for such dinner parties were planned

by the wives, and offered as much lavishness and quantity as was possible. An example of the menu for a typical middle-class dinner party is noted in a cookbook from that era, and includes chilled oysters, consommé, fish with Hollandaise sauce, cheese soufflé, roast chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, celery, cranberry sauce, oyster pies, green salad, cheese and crackers, sherbet, pudding, meringue, sponge cake, and coffee. However, this type of menu was not standard fare for the middle class and was reserved only for the most special occasions. As is still the culture in many parts of the U.S., the middle class were primarily meat-and-potato people.

On the other hand, in sharp contrast to the wealth and comfort that industrial development offered the upper and middle classes, the increasing poverty of the laboring class was striking.

Between the 1830s and 1870s, the average height and weight of Americans reached all-time lows. It is thought that the malnutrition of steadily increasing numbers of laborers unable to afford regular and healthy meals during this period of rapid industrialization was to blame for this decrease in average stature. The diet of these laborers was monotonous at best. When they were able to eat solid meals, those meals were unbalanced, consisting of salted meat, potatoes, cabbage, cake, and the like. Moreover, while the cities were enjoying a variety of foods transported from around the country, those living away from the cities were also limited to monotonous and simple eating habits that mirrored those of the laborers in the city. However, at this same time, food cultures entirely different from the Anglo-Saxon food culture prevalent in the U.S. were being imported with the waves of immigrants arriving daily.

The 'New Immigrants' Bring More Variety

During the last half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the U.S. saw a shift in emigration patterns. While earlier immigrants came primarily from countries in Western and Northern Europe such as England, France, and Germany, a tremendous wave of poor immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and Eastern European



German immigrants enjoying a meal before passing into the United States (1909) (property of Ellis Island Immigration Museum)

countries such as Russia poured into the U.S. between 1900 and 1910. In 1900, the population of the United States was approximately 76,000,000. By 1910, ten percent of the population consisted of these “new immigrants”. These immigrants crossed the sea, escaping widespread famine, such as Ireland’s Potato Famine of the 1840s, and troubling political conditions in their native countries, with great hopes for a brighter future.

Despite some discrimination resulting from differences in religion and lifestyle, for most of them, the United States was all they had dreamed of. Although there were severe economic gaps between the classes, even the poorest had more food than they could have hoped for in their native countries. These people, on the verge of starvation when they left Europe, must have been so surprised and overjoyed to find themselves in a country with more than enough food for everyone. One immigrant from Southern Italy is known to have written home praising the availability of food in the United States. The letter further went on to say that while meals at home had consisted of cornbread and vegetable soup or pasta and polenta, with meat just twice a year, life in the United States was so extravagant that meat was eaten once or twice a week, coffee was always available, and it was possible to eat

bread with butter just like a king. Considering the life that such immigrants left behind, they truly did eat like kings despite daily earnings of just five or six dollars per day. In a letter from another Italian immigrant, we find complaints that “In America, the bread is soft but the life is hard.” However, the letter goes on to praise the United States with, “However difficult life may be, the fact that everyone in the United States has a full stomach is truly wonderful.”

The food cultures that the new immigrants shared with other Americans added tremendous diversity to the American food culture. Most of these people continued to eat the same dishes they had enjoyed in their native countries, thus forming tight bonds with their countrymen that confirmed their sense of identity and easing the difficulties of having arrived in a difficult new land. In the end, these new food cultures and the traditional American Anglo-Saxon food culture were combined.

By far, the greatest influence on American food culture came from the Italians, who formed the majority of the wave of new immigrants. They continued their dietary traditions by using their meager wages to purchase olive oil, Italian cheese, macaroni, and meat, and by raising their own tomatoes. Not only did the Italian Americans preserve their dietary traditions in their own homes and communities, but they passed their traditions on to others by way of their grocery stores and restaurants. Inexpensive and filling spaghetti and macaroni dishes became common fare in the homes of Americans descended from a variety of nationalities. Italian meats such as salami and bologna quickly became indispensable ingredients for building the sandwiches so loved by Americans. Americans also learned to enjoy dishes made from previously unfamiliar vegetables such as eggplant, green pepper, broccoli, and fava beans. In the process of introducing the Italian food culture to American, Italy found herself being Americanized. A prime example of this is meatball spaghetti.

Another unique food culture that had a distinct influence on American food culture was the kosher cuisine of Jewish immigrants. Although most everyone knows that Jewish people do not eat pork, shellfish such as shrimp and crab were also forbidden. Meats such as beef, mutton, chicken, and turkey were permitted, but the blood of the animals was forbidden. Therefore, the meat had to be processed in a special way to make it kosher. Further, with very detailed and strict rules regarding the foods that could be eaten and the ways in which they could be prepared, Jewish immigrants had a very difficult time finding grocery stores with foods they could eat. The dishes prepared for the Sabbath such as chicken

soup, gefilte fish (fish cakes made from ground fish), cholent (vegetable stew with beans, meat, potatoes, etc.), cake, and fruit, required strict observance of Jewish law.

Therefore, it is only natural that Jewish grocery stores and restaurants began to spring up in neighborhoods and towns with a high Jewish population. Among these a new type of business also emerged that sold light kosher meals such as bagels and smoked salmon, and beef pastrami and sausage sandwiches. These delicatessens became popular with not only the Jewish immigrants, but with all of the local residents.

This same period in American history saw an increase in immigrants from Asia, and especially from China. With great construction works, including the transcontinental railroad, and dam and canal projects underway, Chinese immigrants made their way to the Western United States to work as laborers. The food culture of China was introduced to American food culture by way of the restaurants established in the many China Towns that sprang up around the country. With the majority of these laborers having arrived from the Canton Region of China, “Chinese food” was actually Cantonese cuisine adapted to suit the American palate. For this reason, Americans long held the impression that Chinese food was all a hodgepodge of stir-fried vegetables similar to chop suey.

In this way, the United States developed on of the most diverse food cultures in the world. Immigrants from Mexico introduced their staple foods; corn tortillas, beef giblets known as *menudencias*, and soups and stews flavored with chili powder. In addition to popularizing rice, Japanese immigrants introduced dishes flavored with soy sauce and *miso*, as well as a passing familiarity with the New Year’s traditions of *zoni* (vegetable soup with soft rice cakes) and extravagant specialty dishes that they maintained in the United States. Even the Hindu immigrants from India and Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia introduced food cultures based upon the tenets of their individual religions.

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