Crossroads of the Food Cultures of the World

The Fusion of Various Food Cultures Yields a New American Cuisine (part 3)

"America's Correct Food" from a Practical Standpoint

A flood of immigrants into the primarily Anglo society introduced new races, religions, languages and lifestyles to American culture. Some responses to the diversification of American society were blatantly prejudiced, such as the ten-year enforcement of a law enacted in 1882 that prohibited immigration from China because it was thought that a man who eats beef and bread cannot work alongside a man who eats rice. Within the American middle class, most of which simply hoped to preserve the dominance of the Anglo culture, was a group passionately fighting to assimilate recent immigrants into the established American society. These people attempted a variety of methods to convert immigrants from the traditional foods of their native countries to the traditional home-style cooking of New England, referred to at the time as "America's Correct Food".

One of the first of many attempts to Anglicize immigrants was the New England Kitchen, established in 1890 by Ellen Richards, who later became the first president of the American Home Economics Association. The first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Richards and the New England Kitchen offered low-cost and nutritious food to migrant workers and working-class families, as well as instruction in the preparation of convenient and nutritionally consistent New England dishes. However, the New England Kitchen and the home economics movement criticized the diets of immigrants—for example, the Jewish mother who failed to teach her children self-restraint by always giving them the best meat and eggs—and stringently imposed Anglo cooking styles. "America's Correct Food" was so called because it looked at food from a practical standpoint, consisting of ingredients measured for their nutritional value and providing a consistent, healthy diet. In making meals practical by emphasizing the nutritional value and convenience of New England dishes, however,

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Summary of the article *The Dream of the Masses for a Rich Diet is Realized,* presented in FOOD CULTURE No. 9

Among the many changes in the American diet following the Declaration of Independence, one of the most noteworthy was the introduction of canned foods. Canning made a variety of foods portable while preserving them for extended periods of time. These benefits became widely recognized during the Civil War. Another major modification in the American diet following the Civil War was the proliferation of beef. Though buffalo hunting was a thriving industry when the transcontinental railroad was completed, over-hunting soon reduced buffalo herds to near extinction. As the number of buffalo dwindled, the cattle originally introduced to Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors were flourishing. Cowboys from Texas began bringing herds of these cattle north from Mexico, launching the successful American beef industry. At the same time, the American breakfast was revolutionized by the introduction and commercialization of cereals like corn flakes and oatmeal.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new wave of immigrants made their way to the U.S. from poorer European nations, bringing with them the food cultures of their native countries. Of these, dishes imported from Italy became especially common in households throughout the country. In addition, Chinese and Mexican dishes were introduced as were the dishes of new Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim immigrants, resulting in the further diversification of the American food culture.

the home economics movement eliminated the sensual and communal aspects of eating. While New England dishes were considered traditional American foods by the women of the home economics movement, "America's Correct Food" bore no trace of the food cultures of non-Anglo immigrants.

This social experiment failed and the New England Kitchen closed after just three years. In all likelihood, the large number of immigrants found the regular criticism of their own food cultures and the monotony of dishes prepared with consideration only for economy and nutritional value wearisome. It seems that what Ellen Richards perceived as goodwill was not seen as such by the so-called beneficiaries of her services. Immigrants to America simply added truly American foods, such as cereal, Coca Cola and ice cream, to the food cultures they brought with them from their native countries.

From Family Recipes to Cookbook Recipes

Cooking from a practical standpoint became more widespread in the second half of the 19th century, when the publishing of cookbooks began to flourish. The standard American cookbook became known for simple, easy-to-understand recipes that anyone could reproduce. With quantities noted in terms of tablespoons and cups, and unmistakable, brief instructions regarding cooking times and changes that occur with cooking, the need for intuition or experience in preparing dishes was completely eliminated.

One of the reasons that cookbooks became so popular in the U.S. was the great number of immigrants from a variety of countries. Prior to mass-produced cookbooks, housewives exchanged their own favorite recipes, using ambiguous descriptions such as "a little" of this or "a pinch" of that. This all changed with publication of the *Boston Cooking-School Cookbook* in 1896.

The *Boston Cooking-School Cookbook* was written by Fannie Farmer, lecturer at the Boston Cooking School and the inventor of the concept of measuring spoons. Many of Farmer's students were recent immigrants to the U.S. While those who grew up in American society learned recipes by following the example of their mothers and other women in their neighborhoods, and could make sense of vague instructions based on experience, this simply was not so for recent immigrants used to a different food culture and even language. Originally written as a textbook, Famer's week used simple and concise descriptions so that anyone could correctly reproduce her dishes over and over, regardless of their language ability or their level of education.

Although the three thousand original copies of the *Boston Cooking-School Cookbook*, well-received by middle-class women of the day, sold out immediately and the book, now known as the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook*, can be purchased even today, Fannie Farmer was criticized for having produced "an insipid manual of traditional American recipes handed down from mother to daughter." However, in a nation comprising so many cultures and backgrounds, how could the book have been any different and remain useful to so many?

As women joined the labor force in factories, processed food appeared with instant success (©Granger Collection/PPS)

The Effects of Industrialization and the Mass Media

In the 1920s, the United States became the world's first mass-consumer society. While only the wealthy owned automobiles at the beginning of the 20th century, much of the populace was able to purchase automobiles just twenty years later. Industrialization meant that many people gave up their farms and rural lives for jobs as factory workers in the city.

Although new immigrants continued to arrive daily in the U.S., the women could earn more working in factories than they could as domestic servants. A decreasing domestic labor force meant that housewives

were obliged to direct their energies towards preparation of satisfying—in terms of flavor and volume—and healthy meals in a limited amount of time. These women found nearly all of their problems solved by the emerging processed-food industry.

In addition to canned foods, which continued to increase in variety, frozen foods began to appear on the market in the 1920s. At the same time, instant foods, such as cake mixes that made baking a cake as simple as adding an egg and water and popping it in the oven, were introduced. Although the flavor of these processed and instant foods was inferior to that of homemade dishes, they did allow for quick preparation of inexpensive and healthy meals.

The sudden automobile boom in the 1940s created havoc in New York suburbs (©Granger Collection/PPS)

It is thought that this practical approach to meals helped to popularize canned and instant foods in the U.S. Housewives soon came to think of the time spent preparing meals from scratch using fresh ingredients as old-fashioned and began acquiring recipes from radio programs, magazines and cookbooks. In addition, the mass media came to be supported by processed- and packaged-food manufacturer advertisements introducing recipes using their products. The Washburn Crosby Company—one of six milling companies that merged into General Mills—created the fictitious character Betty Crocker, who offered advice and recipes in radio programs and cookbooks using products manufactured by that company. Even today, meals in the U.S. are often made from processed or packaged foods and retain a practical aspect. Clearly, the mass media and processed-food companies played a part in changing the traditional American meal, once made from scratch using recipes handed down through the generations.

In the 1910s, grocery shopping became a "self-service" endeavor. The introduction of supermarkets signaled the end of the days when a shopping list was handed to a clerk who gathered the requested items. In addition, chain supermarkets led to the availability of mass-produced processed and packaged foods to homes all over the country. Supermarkets did not offer credit or delivery, but they drew customers with their low prices. The supermarket concept took off in the 1930s because people living under the shadow of the Great Depression were more than willing to give up additional services and amenities if it meant they could make their purchases for even a little bit less.

In addition to processed foods, new home appliances also helped to make the housewives' lives simpler. Toasters, refrigerators, electric ranges and percolators replaced human servants as the domestic work force. Gas ranges and ovens, which provide adjustable and steady cooking temperatures, freed housewives from the tedious task of constantly watching food as it cooked, and small kitchen gadgets such as peelers and juicers made meal preparation more efficient. The modern American kitchen, overflowing with unnecessary but convenient appliances, utensils and gadgets, is thought to have originated during this time.

From Prohibition to World War II

As the U.S. became firmly established as a mass-consumer society, the "Roaring 20s" saw the growth of popular culture, exemplified by widening recognition of jazz and Hollywood movies. Although laws, encouraged by the Prohibition movement, were enacted in 1919 that made the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcoholic beverages illegal, these same laws were of tremendous benefit to the Coca Cola Company. Coca Cola, a medicinal drink invented in 1886, gained popularity as an alternative to alcohol and soon came to be the representative American soft drink.

The extravagant and carefree days of the 1920s came to an end as the U.S. entered the Great Depression on Black Thursday, October 24, 1929. Housewives were forced to economize and dishes like macaroni and cheese became popular as they were nutritious and

filling without using expensive ingredients like meat. Economizing in the kitchen was remarkable during World War II as well. With the iron and aluminum previously used for canned foods being utilized in the manufacture of munitions, the government encouraged kitchen gardens, or "Victory Gardens," to relieve the vegetable shortage. Housewives used the vegetables from their gardens to make chicken soup and began serving meatloaf rather than steak as ground beef went further in those times of rationing.

Although foodstuffs such as sugar, meat and butter were rationed during World War II, Americans did not suffer from the food shortages that troubled other nations at this time. In fact, the average height and weight of Americans at the end of the war were greater than they had been at the start of the war. Furthermore, the abundance of food served by the military made American soldiers the envy of those fighting for other countries. In fact, while the average American civilian adult male consumed 56 kilograms of meat in 1942, the average for those in uniform was an amazing 163 kilograms. Those stationed in hostile regions even received turkeys from home for Thanksgiving.

Fast Food and TV Dinners

With the flourishing popular culture of the U.S. in the 1920s, it was only natural that mass consumption also increase. The ready availability of practical and safe canned and instant foods had a great influence on the American mentality. In the pursuit of more practical and economic at meals, the American food culture after World War II came to be represented by fast food and frozen TV dinners.

When we think of fast food, hamburgers immediately come to mind. The first hamburger chain, White Castle, appeared in Kansas in 1921. In 1940, Mac and Dick McDonald opened the McDonald's hamburger restaurant, which was developed into the McDonald's chain by first franchisee Ray Kroc beginning in 1955. The McDonald's chain found great success by targeting middle-class "baby boomers" living in the suburbs and in need of a place they could comfortably take their children.

There are various theories as to the origin of the most American of foods, the hamburger, but most indicate that it is somehow rooted in Hamburg, Germany. The hamburger also went by another, not-so-German-sounding name during both World Wars when it was called the "liberty burger". However, there is no doubt that ground beef patties fried and sandwiched between two round slices of bread has become one of the favorite foods of Americans. Chain restaurants like McDonald's standardized the flavor of hamburgers with preparation manuals and guidelines. This consistency was well received by Americans because it meant that they could count on their favorite hamburger always tasting the same, regardless of where they purchased it.

Just as the U.S. introduced and developed the first automobile society, American fast-food chains sprouted and grew almost overnight, and quickly found their way overseas. Drive-ins, the first fast-food chains, offered economical, filling snacks or meals without spending the extra time required of sit-down restaurants. Fast-

Supermarket sales increased at an astounding rate during the Great Depression (1930s) (Photo

food chains such as McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts, Jack in the Box, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Burger King, Shakey's and Pizza Hut, which appeared one after the other during the 1950s, were the perfect response to a new American practicality.

Let's take a closer look at two other extremely popular types of fast food, the hotdog and pizza. Hotdogs are so popular in the U.S. that in 1995, Americans consumed 16 billion hotdogs compared to just 5.2 billion hamburgers and cheeseburgers. In addition to the well-known fast-food chain, Nathan's, hotdogs have become an indispensable part of sporting events, especially baseball games. Hotdogs were introduced to the U.S. by German immigrants in the 19th century, and, like

hamburgers, have become a truly "all American" food. Pizza, of course, came to the U.S. from Italy, and was made popular in the U.S. by American soldiers returning from Italy after World War II. Prior to WWII, pizza was simply one of the ethnic foods of Italian immigrants. Over a period of just fifty years following the war, however, American pizza came to be considerably different than its predecessor, with a thicker crust that formed a ridge around the edge, and toppings preferred by Americans. A number of remarkable variations on the traditional American Italian-style pizza can be found, including the tex-mex pizza, with hot sauce and chicken topping, and the

graphs by the author)

California pizza with artichokes and goat cheese.

During the 1950s, Americans were fascinated by two remarkable products—cars and televisions. At the end of the 1950s, more than 70% of all American households had at least one television. Americans didn't want to miss any part of their favorite programs because of dinner preparation or clean-up. In 1954, the C.A. Swanson & Sons frozen food company responded with its first TV Dinner featuring turkey, cornbread dressing and gravy, buttered peas and sweet potatoes. It came in a box resembling a television, could be cooked in a minimal amount of time and eaten directly from the package it came in. TV Dinners allowed Americans to eat their meals without missing their favorite television programs, housewives didn't have to wash nearly as many dishes afterwards, and at just 98 cents, they were very economical. Although "TV Dinner" is no longer a product name, the label is still used by many to refer to frozen meals in general; the variety and number of which are sold in American supermarkets is truly overwhelming.

While American food, symbolized by fast food and TV dinners, is often the object of disdain the world over, these types of food became popular not for their taste, but for their convenience and economy. No other food in the world is as common or popular as the hamburger and frozen foods. Although the capital reserves and advertising power of major companies surely plays some part, Americans' pursuit of practicality led to the creation of these American foods—the convenience and economy of which have captured the world.

The Julia Child Awakening

Although Americans continued their pursuit of practicality during the 1960's, they were also looking for something more. Julia Child, America's first celebrity chef, responded, causing Americans to change the way they think about food.

Julia Child was born in Pasadena, California, in 1912 and graduated from the prestigious women's college, Smith College, in 1934. After World War II, her husband, Paul, a widely traveled OSS officer and artist known for his sophisticated palate, was assigned to the U.S. Information Service at the American Embassy in Paris and Julia enrolled in Le Cordon Bleu Cooking School. Asked by two other students of the school to help write a French cookbook in English, Child agreed. The book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, by Julia Child, Louisette Bertholle and Simone Beck, was published ten years later in 1961, to great praise from the *New York Times*. After returning to the U.S., Child began her TV cooking show, *The French Chef*, in 1963. Julia Child brought true French cooking into the home for the very first time.

The success of Child's various television cooking shows stemmed not from technique—blunders on her programs were not infrequent—but rather from the pure fun and enjoyment she conveyed to her audience. She made Americans, previously fixated on economy and convenience, forget these concepts altogether. A large presence with a frank character, Child's easy-to-understand yet passionate narration and humor oozed from the television screen to bring the true skill and artistry of French cooking into the home, ultimately changing the previously effete image of French cuisine. Child made dishes such as beef Burgundy and sole

meunieré common standards in American homes.
Julia Child awakened Americans to the pleasure of food and launched a gourmet boom that continues even today. A large segment of American society gave up the traditional American diet based on the familiar and somewhat monotonous New England food culture to develop a curiosity for the cuisines of the world, and fresh new ingredients, herbs and spices. This curiosity spurred the revival of the obsolete farmers' market and the establishment of organic restaurants, natural food stores and ethnic restaurants that have become commonplace in the modern U.S.
Just prior to her death in 2004 at age 91, Julia Child reportedly regretted not one moment of her contribution, by way of television programs, cookbooks and personal instruction, to American cooking. Recipient of numerous awards from the James Beard Foundation, dedicated to furthering the practice and appreciation of the culinary arts in America with regard to chefs, restaurants, journalists and critics, Julia Child certainly raised the level of America's food culture.

Health Consciousness and the Japanese Food Boom

Nouvelle Cuisine, which originated in France, began to take the world by storm in the 1970s. This simple cooking style utilized fresh ingredients to create low-calorie dishes with a light flavor that perfectly suited the growing health consciousness of the U.S.
At this time, Americans could not help but notice the sudden rise in illness and death from heart disease, cancer, diabetes and stroke caused in part by obesity. Even today, more than half of the adult population of the U.S. is considered overweight or obese. This problem was first recognized by the government in 1977, with the McGovern Report, which called for improvements in the eating habits of Americans. This report recommended an overall increase in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, replacing meat (beef and pork) with chicken and fish, and whole milk with low-fat milk, and a significant reduction in high-cholesterol foods such as butter and eggs. It was in the late 1970s that the labels that assault modern consumers today, proclaiming products to be "low-fat" or "non-fat," first appeared.
A major force behind the rise in health consciousness was the increasing popularity of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism already had a long history in the U.S. with the American Vegetarian Society having been established in 1850. This way of life gained great support during the 1960s as a part of the hippie culture and then with publication of the popular *Diet for a Small Planet* by Frances Moore Lappe in 1971, which implied that vegetarianism could help resolve or decrease global environmental problems and famine. The image of vegetarians, whose diet consisted primarily of fruit, vegetables and grains (especially whole grains) and did not eat meat or fish, as healthier people spread. Though once considered strange, eccentric, or unhealthy, vegetarianism gradually caught on. According to a survey in 2000, approximately 2.5% of the American adult population claimed to be vegetarian and half of adult Americans chose vegetarian dishes when dining out. Today, most restaurants in the

The sushi that instigated Nouvelle Japanese cuisine is continuously zundergoing transformation.

Approximately half of

U.S. offer a menu with vegetarian dishes, and meat substitutes can be purchased in almost any supermarket. As would be expected of Americans, frozen and processed foods for vegetarians are also available in surprising number and variety.
In looking at the type of diet recommended by the McGovern Report, one cannot help but think of Japanese food. The grain-, vegetable- and bean-based Japanese diet that also includes fish for good protein is low in both fat and cholesterol, and came to be viewed as the ideal diet from a health standpoint. Even the mass media began promoting the image of the Japanese diet as a healthy diet. Sushi, made of rice and fish, gained particular attention as it provided adequate

protein and was both low-fat and low-calorie. This Japanese favorite quickly became popular with health-conscious and affluent American 'yuppies' during the 1980s.

The standard American sushi is the sushi roll, made of avocado and tempura-fried shrimp, which differs a great deal from Japanese sushi, but it has achieved great popularity with not just the wealthy, but a majority of health-conscious Americans. America's adoption of sushi as a healthy and fashionable food is clearly represented by the not uncommon sight of young women on their lunch breaks purchasing packages of sushi at supermarkets and delis.

Top, right: A typical sushi bar.

all American adults choose vegetarian dishes when dining out (All photographs by the author)

The popularity of sushi led to the spread of Nouvelle Japanese cuisine from the 1990s to the present. Beginning in the U.S., superior chefs such as Nobu Matsuhisa have launched international restaurant chains featuring Japanese dishes influenced by the flavors and styles of other types of cuisine. This weaving of foreign influences into Japanese dishes gently introduces the uninitiated to Japanese cuisine, leaving them with a positive image. One example of this collaboration is sashimi served with a sauce of hot olive oil and *ponzu* (traditional Japanese sauce made of vinegar, soy sauce, and citron juice) for those who are wary of eating raw fish. Restaurants like these are continuously experimenting with new ideas and combinations to create unheard of 'Japanese' dishes that may imitate French style with an artistic display of soy sauce or *miso*, or use caviar or chili pepper with standard Japanese ingredients. The Nouvelle Japanese concept is not limited to diners, but has also inspired motivated American chefs from all disciplines to experiment with traditional Japanese ingredients such as *yuzu*, (citron), *ponzu, sansho* (Japanese pepper) and *miso*.

From Fusion to the New American Cuisine

Nouvelle Japanese cuisine can be called a fusion cuisine—food that combines elements of two or more culinary traditions. Beginning with Pacific Rim cuisine popular during the 1990s, fusion cuisine blossomed in the U.S. Although fusion cuisine has also found a degree of success in other nations, such as Australia, which also comprise people with various ethnic origins, it has not prospered in the way it has in the U.S. American fusion cuisine does not simply combine the culinary traditions of different countries, but also joins regional traditions that result in styles such as tex-mex (Texas-style Mexican food) and New Orleans Creole and Cajun (influenced by French, Spanish, Caribbean, African and Native American traditions). Today, Americans are rediscovering the rich food culture their country has to offer. Even the menu for White House state dinners has changed from exclusively French cuisine to include risotto flavored with Oregon truffles and curry-flavored lobster seasoned with Florida Key limes. Therefore, New American Cuisine is clearly a fusion of well-known, regional American ingredients with the culinary traditions of any and every nation of the world.

Since the 1990s, the word "authentic" has been used extensively to describe ingredients and dishes in the U.S. For so long now, the American food culture has been rooted in practicality, economy and convenience. Although changes do not occur overnight, the U.S. does seem to have had enough of fast food and processed foods. The frequent use of the word, "authentic," however, may give us a glimpse of the bright future of the American food culture.

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