Immigration, Travel and the Internationalization of the American Diet

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Abstract

The recent explosion of food choices in most of the Western world, particularly the soaring consumption of foods previously regarded as "foreign," has been the product of two major historic processes. First, improvements in transportation have allowed a greater variety of food products to be shipped more economically around the world. Second, many of the same improvements in transportation have allowed the movement of people around the world in unprecedented numbers. In the modern age we have seen them move in increasing numbers in two ways: as voluntary immigrants and as tourists.

Immigrants normally try to bring their food habits with them, and the United States had its topography and diet entirely transformed by them. In the twentieth century it became common to describe its culture and diet as the products of a "melting pot." However, this paper argues that one group of immigrants, those of British origin, dominated its culture and diet, and that the subsequent immigrants had remarkably little impact on it. Indeed, quite the reverse was usually the case, as the later arrivals' dietary habits were almost universally regarded as inferior to those of native-born Americans.

How then to explain the cultural component of the rising popularity of "foreign" foods in America? Travel does play a role, but in the form of the tremendous expansion of middle class travel abroad, which the jet age inaugurated after 1960. The idea that foreign travel, particularly to Europe, was a civilizing influence was an old one in America. However, previously only those with a large amount of leisure time and money could reap its supposed civilizing benefits, which included an openness to foreign foods. While many of the new jet-age tourists may not have returned with a taste for the foods of the particular places they visited, the association of foreign food with culturally uplifting international travel helped make an appreciation for foreign food tastes a new mark of distinction in middle-class America.

A Culinary Melting Pot?

The most common metaphor for the history of American immigration is that of the melting pot—the idea that the cultures of immigrants' native countries were merged into a new, uniquely American culture to which each contributed. Those who celebrate the contributions of immigrants often cite their impact on the American diet to support this view (1). Folklorists and others search church groups, social clubs, and enclave communities to find people who still preserve Old Country methods of food preparation and celebrate them as symbolizing immigration's positive impact on America. I would suggest that an examination of the role of immigration in the formation of the American diet reveals something quite different—that only one immigrant group, the Italians, have had an important impact on the American diet in the twentieth century, and that we owe such things as supermarket shelves brimming with formerly rare foods and spices and restaurants full of people dining on "foreign" or "ethnic" foods to both specific historical circumstances in the 1970s and 1980s and the growth of American tourism abroad.

Migrants to the New World and Neophobia

That people would take to new foods and tastes to the extent that Americans have done recently is, on the face of it, quite surprising. After all, human beings are generally very conservative regarding changing their food tastes. As Claude Fischler points out, much of this rests on the well-grounded "neophobia" of the omnivore. A species such as ours has very good life-preserving reasons to be cautious about ingesting new things (2). People often reinforce this conservatism by identifying their culture, and those of others, by what they eat, using this to denigrate cultures with different food habits.

The resulting neophobia has marked much of the history of food and migration in the New World. Sometimes the results have been disastrous. The thirteenth-century Norse colony in Greenland probably disappeared in large part because, instead of adopting the seal-meat diet of the neighbouring Inuit, whom they despised as primitives, the immigrants insisted on grazing cattle and sheep on the paltry grasslands. When overgrazing and a colder climate made dietary change practically compulsory, the Norsemen refused to change and instead died out or left. Two hundred years later, the Spanish conquerors of America also looked down

on the natives and their diets. Although they did send many of the new foods they encountered back to Europe, they put the natives to work on farms growing wheat and raising cattle and sheep so that they could continue to eat in their accustomed fashion. To them, the foods such as maize and beans upon which the natives subsisted were of low status.

Similarly, the British colonists in America would eat the native maize—"Indian corn"—only after it was approved of in England, and even then it remained a second-class food. Wherever possible, they grew higher-status British wheat and fed most of the maize to their livestock or their slaves. Other New World products, such as the potato and tomato, were also adopted very slowly, and only after Europe had accepted them (3). Great variations in climate and poor transportation did force poorer people to rely heavily on locally produced foods, including maize, but the colonial elites, and those who rose to join them, clung to the British culinary model. Ultimately, these Spanish and British attempts to cling to their traditional diets helped to transform totally the ecology of the New World, in a process that has been aptly labelled "ecological imperialism" (4).

Rule Britannia

Ecological imperialism was a process of conquest, in which the migrants of highest status were able to assert the hegemony of their tastes not only on the natives they found there, but also on the immigrants, both voluntary and involuntary, who followed. Indeed, the food habits of the British conquerors proved remarkably resistant to the influence of subsequent immigrants. Although the United States gained political independence from Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, the British model still prevailed thereafter in gustatory matters. In most of the new nation, wheat bread, preferably white, was the preferred staple food. The sign of prosperity was a diet with a surfeit of meat, preferably beef, with little reliance on grains, legumes, and vegetables. Foods would be prepared simply—roasting and frying were preferred for the meats—and although there was some use of spices, it was mainly in condiments, rather than in complex cooked dishes (5).

For much of the nineteenth century, the waves of immigrants who swept into the

country were rather quickly integrated into this culinary tradition. At first, this was because many of them were from the British Isles and Northern Europe—places where people aspired to diets that were similar to those of British-Americans. The Irish, who were despised for their poverty and their meagre, practically meatless diets, enthusiastically adopted a more English-style diet once they could afford to partake in America's abundant supply of meat. The Germans, many of whom were well-educated people who had fled after the failed Revolutions of 1848, were more highly regarded, and some of their foods were adopted into the mainstream American diet. (It was they who introduced mass-produced dried noodles, along with sausages and light beer, to America.) Some groups, such as Scandinavians and Bohemians, who tended to settle in the agricultural frontiers in communities of their countrymen, were slower to assimilate, but they had only minimal impact on national food habits and eventually they too failed to preserve most of their native foodways.

Perhaps the greatest factor undermining the persistence of ethnic influences came in the mid- and later-nineteenth century, with the rise of the beef industry. The huge cattle ranches of the West, the slaughterhouses of Chicago, and the invention of the refrigerated railroad car ensured an affordable supply of the beef to practically everyone in the expanding industrial cities of the East and Midwest. Since most European immigrants were also from cultures where meat was of high status, and beef was particularly so, their diets were soon altered to take advantage of this. To many, a slab of beef on the table came to symbolize the wisdom of their decision to emigrate (6).

"New Immigrants" and Dietary "Americanization"

In the later nineteenth century, the immigrants' countries of origins shifted decisively towards the economically stricken South and East of Europe. Unlike the previous Northern Europeans, these so-called "New Immigrants" differed markedly in looks and culture from the large majority of native-born Americans. Generally impoverished, often short and darker-skinned, they were regarded by many native-born Americans as mentally inferior, fit only for the most menial jobs in America's expanding industries. Their inferior food habits—particularly their pro-

pensity to eat strange-smelling stews and garlic—became part of the indictment against them.

Native-born Americans who feared being overwhelmed by a tidal wave of "inferiors" struggled to stop it. More optimistic ones tried to "Americanize" them by teaching them the American way of cooking and eating. Professionals in welfare agencies and the public schools told the immigrants that their foodways were uneconomical, unhealthy, and, well, un-American. Before World War One, these efforts bore little fruit, in large part because the reformers misjudged the extent to which the immigrants had already changed their diets—mainly to take advantage of the high-status foods, such as beefsteak and fresh fruits and vegetables, that nutritional scientists considered wasteful purchases for them (7).

The New Immigration ground to a halt during the war and was effectively cut off by the draconian immigration restriction laws of 1921 and 1924. By then, the outlines of the prototypical immigrant food experience had already emerged. The first generation would try to preserve many of their old food habits. They would live in ethnic enclaves, surrounded by purveyors of foods of their homelands. However, they would also adopt foods such as beef, white bread, butter, and coffee that were of high status and unavailable to them in their homelands, perhaps preparing them in the Old Country manner. They would also adopt some of the New World's prepared foods and kitchen aids that made preparation easier—dry cereals, canned soups, corn oil, and vegetable shortening. Meanwhile, their children, the second generation, would be thrust into public school systems run mainly by British-Americans, in which they learned that most other Americans regarded their parents' food habits as inferior. They would throw away their school lunches and insist that their mothers make sandwiches on British-American style white bread. They would demand milk, which they were told would make them grow tall and strong. When they reached secondary school, the British-American dishes they saw in their school cafeterias and home economics classes, as well as in the media, would reinforce the lesson that their parents were out of step. They would then marry, often to people of different ethnicity, and move out of the ethnic enclaves, setting up households in which mainly British-American food was cooked, often from recipes derived from the media and food processors. The foods of their parents would be relegated, perhaps, to festive occasions: nostalgia food (8).

Meanwhile, the rise of national transportation networks and giant food producers and processors was leading to the increasing dominance of fewer and larger sup-

pliers of foods for the American table. The ensuing process of homogenization also worked to marginalize ethnic (and regional) cuisines. The heyday of this process, and the national cuisine that developed out of it, came in the 1950s, in what I have called "the Golden Age of Food Processing" (9). Throughout the nation, Americans of all classes now aspired to, and generally partook of, what could still be called the ideal, traditional, British-American diet. Beef reigned supreme, whether in the form of huge roasts, giant slabs of steak or more modest hamburgers and meat loafs. Potatoes were the preferred accompaniment, and spicier and sweeter foods—mustard, Worcestershire sauce, ketchup—were generally served as condiments. "Meat-and-potatoes," which connoted beef and potatoes, became the synonym for something substantial and all-American.

Italian-American Dietary Exceptionalism

Only one major immigrant group, Italian-Americans, had managed to survive the onslaught. This was because, first, food was unusually important in their family life, which was itself extraordinarily important. Second, Italian-American entrepreneurs were able to create vast networks of food producers and suppliers in America, enabling them to reduce their dependence on the Old Country for many of the ingredients, such as dried pasta and fresh vegetables, necessary to preserve their food habits. Italian housewives were thus able to fashion a cuisine that took advantage of the foods, such as beef, that few could afford in Italy and prepare them in ways that remained distinct from those of the surrounding "Americans," whose food habits they considered inferior. This hybrid "Italian-American" cuisine was not really Italian—there was no such thing in that very regionalized country—but neither was it British-American. It became an important source of pride for individual families as well as for Italian-Americans in general (10).

An important factor in allowing Italian-American cuisine to persist was the change in American attitudes that began during World War One. Before then, social workers would report things such as, "Still eating spaghetti, not yet Americanized" (11). Now, in 1917, with Italy on the same side as the USA in the Great War, spaghetti became the "food of our Allies." Italians' status rose some more in the 1920s and 1930s, as conservative Americans admired the achieve-

ments of the strongman Mussolini, and during the 1940s and 1950s, when many Italian-Americans became celebrities in sports and entertainment. With this admiration came increased acceptance of their signature foods, especially pasta and tomato sauce. Italian-American restaurants specializing in pasta and tomato sauce thrived in a number of cities during the 1920s. In the 1930s major food processors successfully marketed "spaghetti dinners": packaged spaghetti and canned tomato sauce, with a small box of grated American-made "Parmesan." Spaghetti and tomato sauce was one of the few non-British-American foods served to the US armed forces during World War Two. The popular taste for it then paved the way for the rapid acceptance of pizza, an obscure dish that had almost died out in its native Naples. When it was revived by Italo-Americans in the 1950s, it was but a small step for people accustomed to boiled pasta with tomato sauce and cheese to enjoy baked bread dough with tomato sauce and cheese (12).

Low-Status Immigrants and Low-Status Foods

Other immigrants' food did not fare so well. There was some acceptance of Americanized versions of Chinese food—chop suey, chow mein and other dishes that are unknown in China— but this had nothing to do with immigration from there, which had been effectively cut off in the late nineteenth century. Significantly, Greeks established themselves as major players in the American restaurant industry, but rarely served Greek food. Indeed, in the late 1950s Greeks, who to the unpractised American eye looked and acted Italian, began taking over much of the pizzeria business.

The use of frozen ingredients helped make pizza one of the engines of the fast food phenomenon that swept America in the 1970s and 1980s. Although hamburger chains, based on the old British-American love of beef, are most closely identified with the fast-food explosion, recent years have also seen the rise of large Mexican food chains. This would seem to run counter to the idea that acceptance of foreign foods runs in inverse proportion to the status of the immigrants with whom they are identified. Mexicans, after all, have historically been regarded as low-status by "Anglo" Americans, particularly in the Southwest. Mexican food was derided as unsanitary—the source of "Montezuma's Revenge"—and much too

"hot" for civilized American tastes. But a closer look at the history of Mexican fast food in America shows that the key step in the rise of Taco Bell, the leading chain, was to rid itself of its Mexican connotations. Its rapid success came after it changed its symbol from a sleeping Mexican in the traditional sombrero and serape to a non-Mexican bell, derived from the founder's last name (13). Moreover, its food, and that of its imitators (all founded by "Anglos"), bore as little relationship to the food of Mexico as chop suey did to what was eaten in China. Instead, its signature dish, "tacos", could be regarded as a variation on pizza: a farinaceous product, this time fried and crispy, covered with tomato sauce, meat, and cheese. Salsa, which gained national popularity as a condiment, was a variation on tomato sauce. Its Mexican connotations were often mitigated by calling it, as well as the dishes such as burritos (practically unknown in Mexico) with which it was used, the more reassuring "Tex-Mex" or "Cal-Mex."

French Food: High Status and Low Immigration

As if to underscore the inverse relationship between low-status immigration and food adoption, there is the fact that the foreign food that has historically had the highest status among the social elite was from France, a country that supplied almost no low-status immigrants at all. The key figures in this are often cited as President Thomas Jefferson, who brought back a taste for French cuisine from his years as America's representative in France, and the Swiss entrepreneurs John and Peter Delmonico, who opened the country's first French restaurant in New York City in 1827 (14). But far more important were the upper-class American travellers to France, who went there to acquire the culture and civilization that was thought to be so lacking in the New World. For them, returning from Paris with a taste for French food was a mark of having assimilated the culture of the epicentre of fine taste (15). By the 1850s, American hotels and other establishments that aspired to attract a high-status clientele were featuring French menus and dishes in their dining rooms. In the later nineteenth century, when a new elite of super-rich arose, they solidified their claims to the high status by hiring fine French chefs to staff the kitchens of their huge new mansions. Delmonico's became synonymous with food for the rich, the famous and the powerful, and French chefs spread into a number of other cities, staffing the kitchens of aspiring imitators (16).

French food has had its ups and downs in America since then. Prohibition, which banned the sale of alcoholic drinks from 1921 to 1933, drove most French restaurants out of business. The upper class abandoned the life style revolving around dinner parties in gigantic mansions for less opulent social and recreational pursuits. The Great Depression and World War Two reinforced the tendency to turn their backs on French food, which was regarded as too showy and luxurious for those difficult times. By the 1950s, food tastes had almost ceased being a mark of distinction, as most Americans took pride in a prosperous economy that seemed to be providing an abundance of traditional British-American foods, such as beef and poultry, at prices that were affordable to practically all. The families of second- and third-generation immigrants now sat down to meals that were not much, if at all, different from the meals consumed by those who traced their ancestry in America much further back (17). The 1920s ban on immigration, which cut the supply of new blood and traditional appetites from the Old Country, probably eased the way towards this, but it is unlikely that the continuation of low-status immigration would have meant any more ethnic influence on the national diet. Indeed, from 1948 to 1965 hundreds of thousands of impoverished Puerto Ricans took advantage of their new status as American citizens to migrate to the mainland, mainly to New York City and environs. Although New Yorkers had a reputation for being the most culinarily adventurous of Americans, they seemed to have absolutely no interest in the food of these low-status immigrants.

Dietary Internationalization Since 1965

In 1965 the immigration law was liberalized, eliminating many of the features that had discriminated against non-Europeans and opening the gates to millions of new low-status immigrants. Mexicans and Central Americans poured across the border, legally and illegally. Waves of Dominicans, Haitians, and others arrived from the Caribbean. Large numbers of Vietnamese refugees arrived in the 1970s, along with many Philippinos, Taiwanese, Koreans, mainland Chinese and other Asians.

At the same time, Americans' interest in foreign, or "ethnic," food began to expand exponentially. Yet this owed little to the new immigration, for again, there

was little interest in the foods of low-status immigrants. Rather, it was the revival of interest in French food, particularly among the upper-middle class, that was the first major breakthrough. In the restaurant industry this metamorphosed into the spread of ersatz French "Continental" restaurants and "Northern Italian" restaurants. The latter self-consciously turned their backs on the spaghetti-and-meatballs dinners of the "Southern Italian" restaurants associated with Italian-Americans. Instead, they plugged into Italy's new image as a leader in modern style, the sophisticated place where people lived "La Dolce Vita" and made intensely meaningful films. Chinese restaurateurs downplayed any connection to "Cantonese" food, which was associated with poor immigrants from the South of China, and offered Szechuan, Hunan and "Shanghai," cuisines. Gourmet trailblazers were soon trying other new foods—European, Asian and Middle Eastern—which again had little apparent connection to immigration.

If immigration was hardly a factor, then how does one explain what seems to be the impressive internationalization of the American restaurant, supermarket and table? There was, of course, the much-discussed global economy, which was making a plethora of previously exotic food products available to consumers throughout the Western world on a day-to-day basis. But this in itself does not explain why Americans chose to consume many new foods—after all, what about neophobia?

The Weakening of Neophobia

Two of the factors that helped undermine neophobia among the middle classes by encouraging the adoption of new kinds of foods were socio-political. The first, curiously, was the aftermath of the radical youth movements of the later 1960s—the New Left and counterculture. Although these practically evaporated politically in the early 1970s, much of their cultural influence persisted. In particular, their anti-imperialist, anti-big-business, romantic, "Back-to-Nature" rhetoric had helped stimulate an admiration for the cultures, and food, of poor people in the Third World, whose consumption of whole grains, brown rice, and "unprocessed" foods they regarded as morally superior to the Western diet (18). Later, this middle class receptivity to "peasant" foods was reinforced by studies claiming the health bene-

fits of regimes such as the "Mediterranean Diet", which emphasized curbing consumption of meat in favour of grains and vegetables.

The second factor was the change in American attitudes spurred by the so-called East Asian "economic miracle," particularly as manifested in the booming American market for Japanese consumer goods. This began in the 1960s with the invasion of high-quality Japanese cameras, and moved on in the ensuing decades to electronic goods and the ultimate symbol of American consumption, automobiles. In the 1970s, chefs in fine restaurants prided themselves on blending the techniques of the "Nouvelle Cuisine" with those of Japan. By the end of the century, not only were Americans crowding into Japanese restaurants to eat sushi, a dish that historically was commonly reviled, they were even buying it in supermarkets. Again, immigration from Asia, although now substantial, had little to do with the process. Thai cuisine probably achieved high status among the middle class because so few Thais emigrated to America. Conversely, middle class native-born Americans were little interested in exploring the foods of Asian countries from which large numbers of poor immigrants originated: places such as the Philippines, Cambodia, Korea, and Taiwan. Vietnamese restaurants did make a mark, but mainly, it could be said, by moving into the low-cost, low-status slot previously occupied by Chinese chop suey and chow mein houses. None of these cuisines made much of an impact on home cooking.

The Curious Role of Tourism

Finally, just as international travel had helped bring French cuisine to America in the nineteenth century, so it again played a major role in internationalizing American food. Now, however, it was the middle classes who comprised the bulk of foreign travellers. It is no accident that the decade of the 1960s, when the middle classes began to develop an interest in foreign foods, was the time in which the introduction of jet passenger planes helped foster a new boom in middle class travel abroad. But the process was by no means as direct as in the nineteenth century. Yes, tourists returning from trips to France glowing about their gastronomic epiphanies did help fuel the revival of French food in America. But for the most part the new middle class tourists were still wary of eating abroad—concerned par-

ticularly about poor sanitary conditions and being served unknown foods that might disgust them. The most successful trips were normally ones that shielded them from those aspects of local cuisines that might jar their taste buds, stomachs, or other sensibilities by providing them with either American-style foods or inoffensive "international" food.

Nevertheless, as in the nineteenth-century, travel abroad was assumed to be "broadening," and one of the benefits of travel abroad was thought to be returning with more cosmopolitan tastes. For many tourists, particularly for those visiting the Third World, the saving grace was that they did not have to bring back a taste for the foods of the specific places they visited. One did not have to return from Jamaica demanding goat for dinner. The mark of the well-travelled person was simply being open to new experiences, including food tastes. Travel magazines devoted increasing space to eating in foreign lands. Travellers to the Arctic now wished to taste whale meat (19). In response to the new value placed on adventurousness in eating, *Gourmet magazine*, with its avid upper-middle-class readership, now expanded steadily from its Francophilic roots into articles on travel to and eating in ever more exotic places.

Internationalizing the Working Class Diet

If these factors encouraged the middle classes to adopt new foods, what about the people below them on the socio-economic ladder? Why did they begin eating nachos, salsa, egg rolls and bagels? Poorer people rarely travel abroad, except perhaps to see relatives. Few were moved by the counterculture's revulsion against "processed" foods, or news of the East Asian economic miracle.

Part of the answer may be that many of these foods are losing their ethnic identity—that they have been altered enough, both by processing and promotion, to rob them of their specific foreign associations. Few people who eat bagels now associate them with Jews (20). How many consumers of tortilla chips think of them as Mexican? One could even ask how many of them still think of pizza as Italian, or nachos as Mexican, which they are not? How many poor people could tell you that "frankfurter" and "hamburger" are German words? Do Americans of any class

think of yogurt, as they once did, as a Bulgarian health food? To many Americans, these are not really "foreign" or "ethnic" foods at all. Despite the statistics on rising sales of foreign foods and spices, it could still be argued that they are being assimilated in ways that do not substantially challenge traditional British-American foodways (21). Moreover, what foreign connotations can possibly be derived from the extraordinary mixing of foods and tastes that one sees almost everywhere in America —pizza topped with pineapple, shrimp salad in a pita, bagel pizzas, and so on? Surely these, too, are but a modern (or some would say post-modern) way of domesticating foreign foods.

Another impetus to internationalization in the lower socio-economic rungs may lie in the old observation among anthropologists that new food habits are usually introduced into cultures from the top down (22). In the case of contemporary America, it would seem that it was not so much the consumption of specific foods, but rather the more general weakening of food neophobia. Perhaps the middle-class-dominated media, the schools and other sources have disseminated among them the idea that an openness to foreign foods is an admirable quality. Perhaps this means that there is still a distinctly American way of eating, characterized not so much by the foods, preparations or even the tastes involved, but instead by an extraordinary willingness to try new foods and combinations of foods.

The Paradox of Plenty

It might be satisfying to end on this rather optimistic note: the story of a people ridding themselves of their unhealthy fear of food. However, two caveats must be added. First, for the most part, the willingness to experiment is not as extreme as it might seem, for the most successful new foods and tastes would seem, like tacos and pizza, to be ones that are built on familiar tastes. Second, as is well known, other factors have emerged to counterbalance the decline of neophobia. These include recurring fears about the unhealthy nature of many foods themselves. (So many of these, such as beef, butter, eggs and sugar, were cornerstones of the traditional British-American diet that one is tempted to label it "paleophobia.") Added to this is guilt over "fattening" foods, which are thought to be deleterious

to both health and body image. It is thus one of the many paradoxes of Americans' relationship to their food that despite their relative openness to new foods and tastes, they now rank among the world's most fearful people regarding food and health (23). The road to pineapple pizza is still paved with fear and trepidation.

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Biography

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Harvey Levenstein in Professor Emeritus of History at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. He has written extensively on American social history, including two books, *Revolution at the Table* and *Paradox of Plenty* (Oxford University Press, 1988, 1993), which constitute a social history of American food since 1880. Born in Toronto, Canada, after graduating from the University of Toronto he did his postgraduate work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He then taught at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and Columbia University in New York, N.Y., before returning to Canada in 1973. He subsequently spent two years as a visiting senior lecturer and research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick, England, and was a Chercheur Invité at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. His latest book, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (University of Chicago Press, 1998) developed from his interest in food and travel. He is presently working on a sequel to it, as well as a study of the history of moralizing about food in America.