

Elliott Johnson
Ethnic Foodways in America
American Ethnic Restaurants Torn Between Popularity and Authenticity

Food is a large part of identity. Within a larger country, ethnic groups are able to carve their own cultural place and to affirm their identity with food. In America this process of ethnic groups affirming their identity with food is closely tied to restaurants, especially given the mainstream popularity of ethnic food in the last 30 years or so. Sidney Mintz, a powerful voice in the research of the connection between food and culture, demonstrates that the United States does not have a single sacred cuisine as compared to other strong culinary cultures such as France. Instead, convenience and widespread availability of desired foods is preferred.ⁱ It is within this context, a culinary playing field that is not dominated by strong and ‘sacred’ food traditions that ethnic cuisines have been allowed to grow up as a part of the wider American culinary experience. Americans do, however, expect certain things from their food. As a result, owners of ethnic restaurants need to alter their food and its presentation in various ways to appeal to Americans. The development of ethnic restaurants in America has been torn between the desire to properly represent ethnicity, and the need to change food to appeal to Americans and to fit into the broader American culinary tradition, torn between authenticity and popularity.

In *Eating American* Sidney Mintz argues that America does not have a cohesive national cuisine due to a lack of a serious community eating the same food and engaging in serious discussion about it. Instead, Americans frequently choose fast food and less authentic “bowl-derizations” of food which focus on convenience over quality.ⁱⁱ Mintz points to a food system directed towards supplying disingenuously authentic regional *delicacies* far and wide because of the considerable profit involved.ⁱⁱⁱ This system of food distribution is not limited to clam chowder and hot dogs. Ethnic groups may take advantage of these same distribution systems.

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Over time the role of restaurants, and specifically ethnic restaurants, has changed in American society. From 1972 to 2004 American expenditures on away from home food increased from roughly half to roughly 90% of expenditures on food cooked and eaten at home.^{iv} This increase in the popularity of restaurants increases exposure to ethnic cuisine in a general sense. This exposure, however, has not necessarily meant that ethnic groups have always been able to present their food exactly as they want to. In *From Spaghetti and Meatballs through Hawaiian Pizza to Sushi: The Changing Nature of Ethnicity in American Restaurants* Liora Gvion and Naomi Trostler chronicle the changing attitudes towards ethnic restaurants in America from decade to decade beginning in the 1960's. In the 1960's "ethnic dishes were detached from the ethnics and re-defined in articulation with the mainstream culture"^v The balance of forces tipped towards making foods approachable to American audiences at this time. This meant that Mexican and Chinese restaurants felt the need to serve sirloin steaks, and that other marginally ethnic dishes (such as a hamburger with Roquefort cheese [French]) were advertised as French, or Italian, or Indian.^{vi}

By the 1970's "the acquaintance with the repertoire of ethnic dishes was still limited" however some knowledge of the background of the food was increasingly evident.^{vii} Bit by bit ethnic restaurants both proved themselves to be capable of meeting American culinary desires, and gained greater acceptance of their traditional foods. It was not until the 1990's that an active promotion of an authentic ethnic atmosphere was fully realized.^{viii} Ethnic restaurants have gradually been accepted into American foodways (the broader sense of how food and culture interact). This greater acceptance has allowed greater room for representing ethnicity through food in the way that ethnic groups choose.

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Lucy Long says in *Culinary Tourism* that ethnicity is a “dynamic cultural construct and is more usefully thought of as a process of contextualization than an actual objective state.”^{ix}

Within the context of this model, ethnicity is a changing force that particular ethnic groups have the power to work to define in the way of their choosing. This definition must operate within the context of the majority group, however it is a dynamic and multidirectional process.^x In the case of restaurants, ethnic groups are given a forum to represent their culture, but must conform to American foodways to be accepted in America.

Susan Kalcik mentions in *Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity* that within the context of American culture, food is a powerful representation of ethnicity.^{xi} Food allows immigrants or ethnic minorities to come together on common ground, and to express pride in one aspect, at least, of their home country or their home culture that they are able to hold to in America. In *India Shopping*, Purnima Mankekar cites the scholar Parama Roy who has said that there is an “intimate relationship between gustatory and national memories.”^{xii} Ethnic restaurants represent both a livelihood and a cultural outlet for minority groups. The relationship between ethnic restaurants and American foodways is not as simple as minority ethnic groups presenting their cuisine, finding acceptance, and holding on entirely to their own desired representation of their food. In this representation of their cuisine “the new group presents its food in acceptable, safe arenas where some Americans try it out and learn to like it.”^{xiii} After all, all humans eat food. Food is automatically a realm for shared experience.

An important aspect of the restaurant is that it is a public place. No matter how limited a restaurant’s clientele may be in practice, restaurants are open to whoever walks in their doors, at least if the owners wish to stay in business. In an interview, restaurant owner John Wiederholt made repeated mention of how difficult it is to stay profitable in the restaurant business, given a

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limited population which has easy access to the restaurant, and given various unavoidable fixed costs associated with maintaining a building and supplying food.^{xiv} It behooves ethnic minorities to allow general admittance to their restaurants, if only because there are not enough of their kin who are readily familiar with their food around to support the store, without any 'outsider' business.

Mainstream Americans are often initially wary about unfamiliar food traditions, responding with disgust at foods mistakenly believed to be made out of 'inedible' products such as cats or dogs.^{xv} Regardless, with time unfamiliar ingredients become more palatable. Lucy Long notes that "food items can shift in their [mainstream perception] because individuals' and society's perceptions of edibility and exoticness can shift."^{xvii} Over time, with sufficient positive exposure, what was once novel becomes acceptable. The first step is acceptance of an outside cuisine as edible, and with time 'simply edible' may transform into 'delicious.' Italian food, for example, was not universally accepted as soon as Italians immigrated in appreciable numbers to America by the mid to late 19th century^{xviii}. It was not until the post WWII era that Americans embraced food products with Italian connotations, and Italian cuisine in general.^{xix}

When ethnic cuisines are accepted into broad American foodways they face changes in their makeup, at least so far as to appeal to outsiders. While ethnic restaurants may be able to control how they choose to increase their appeal to mainstream Americans, they cannot fully control the new social connotations that their food earns from American society at large. A restaurant may choose to appeal to mainstream Americans by framing their cuisine in an appealing light, by translating the names of menu items into American terms, or by suggesting blander dishes.^{xx} A sample Chinese food menu contains multiple uses of the term B.B.Q. which is associated with America, and which is a comfortable recognizable American classification for

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meat.^{xxi} This menu also included chicken nuggets (another American term) (figure 1). In both

cases these terms serve to make the food on the menu appear more approachable for an

American audience. As a more significant change, a restaurant might also go so far as to change

“ingredients and preparation methods of particular dishes in order to adapt to the foodways

system of the anticipated consumers.”^{xxii} As food is increasingly altered, ethnic groups travel

away from the realm of authentic representation of their culinary traditions.

If acceptance into American cuisine is defined in terms of a particular food being popularly consumed, then many ethnic foods have properly been inducted into the American cuisine. On the one hand, American imitation of ethnic food suggests that the food is culturally acceptable, and ethnic modification of their own food suggests that they are willing to become an important part of American foodways. On the other hand, egregious bastardizations serve to undermine ethnic determinism. If a particular group’s goal is to simply blend into America and be accepted as fully American then this cooption is not a problem, however if a group intends to hold on to sacred cultural factors, then cooption of their food could be considered an affront. On a broader level, the experience of ethnic minority groups in America is very similar to the experience of ethnic restaurants. In both cases there is pressure to conform to American values, but also a vague acceptance of outsiders who may have something to give to America. Given sufficient time outsider foods and lifestyles both are gradually accepted into a greater nebulous American culture to some extent. What varies is how much these groups must give up on or alter, to what extent they will compromise with American culture, and to what extent they compromise their own culture.

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Figure 1. Chinese Restaurant Menu.

Sixty-Five Chinese Restaurant
201 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL., 60606.
ZAGAT SURVEY Ph# (312) 782-6565 Fax# (312) 782-3665 **ZAGAT SURVEY**
Hours: Mon.-Fri. 10 A.M. to 7 P.M. Sat.-Sun. 11 A.M. to 6 P.M.

Appetizers

#11 Spring Roll(1)	\$0.95
#12 Crab Rangoon(1)	\$0.90
#13 Egg Roll(1)	\$1.35
#14 Chicken Nuggets(pint)	\$3.10
#21 B.B.Q. Pork(pint)	\$3.95
#91 Chicken Wings(3)	\$2.00

Dim Sums

#151 Steamed B.B.Q. Pork Bun(1)	\$0.95
#153 Steamed Chicken Bun(1)	\$0.95
#154 Steamed Pork Dumplings(2)	\$1.15
#156 Steamed Shrimp Dumplings(2)	\$1.45
#157 Mochi Rice w/Meat(1)	\$1.45
#158 Pot Stickers(2)	\$1.45
#159 Shrimp Toasts(2)	\$1.45

Soups

#31 Hot & Sour Soup(10oz.)	\$1.40	#41 Egg Drop Soup(10oz.)	\$1.15
#30 Hot & Sour Soup(pint)	\$2.50	#40 Egg Drop Soup(pint)	\$2.00

Fried Rice

Large

#15 Shrimp Fried Rice	\$5.05
#16 Beef Fried Rice	\$4.85
#17 B.B.Q. Pork Fried Rice	\$4.85
#18 Chicken Fried Rice	\$4.85
#19 Vegetable Fried Rice	\$4.75

Medium

#145 Shrimp Fried Rice	\$4.50
#146 Beef Fried Rice	\$4.25
#147 B.B.Q. Pork Fried Rice	\$4.25
#148 Chicken Fried Rice	\$4.25
#149 Vegetable Fried Rice	\$4.15

**Combination Plates Include The Specified Dish with
either White Rice, Fried Rice or Noodles**

Add 15 cents to Combo
with Shrimp Fried Rice only

Combination Plates

	<u>w/White Rice</u>	<u>w/Fried Rice</u>	<u>w/Noodles</u>
B.B.Q. Pork Appetizer(Medium)	#22 \$4.70	#23 \$5.75	#24 \$5.85
B.B.Q. Pork Appetizer(Large)	#32 \$5.50	#33 \$6.75	#34 \$6.85
B.B.Q. Pork Chow Mein Cantonese(Medium)	#42 \$4.60	#43 \$5.00	#44 \$5.10
B.B.Q. Pork Chow Mein Cantonese(Large)	#52 \$5.40	#53 \$6.05	#54 \$6.15
Chicken Dishes(Medium)-Group A	#62 \$4.65	#63 \$5.20	#64 \$5.30
Chicken Dishes(Large)-Group A	#72 \$5.45	#73 \$6.20	#74 \$6.40
chicken dishes (group A):- kung bo chicken, garlic chicken, broccoli w/chicken, sweet & sour chicken or eggplant chicken			
Chicken Dishes(Medium)-Group B	#162 \$4.50	#163 \$5.00	#164 \$5.20
Chicken Dishes(Large)-Group B	#172 \$5.25	#173 \$6.00	#174 \$6.15
chicken dishes (group B):- tofu chicken or chicken chow funn			
Beef Dishes(Medium)	#82 \$4.75	#83 \$5.30	#84 \$5.40
Beef Dishes(Large)	#92 \$5.55	#93 \$6.40	#94 \$6.50
beef dishes:- beef w/broccoli, beef chow funn or beef w/tomato & green pepper			
Shrimp Egg Foo Young(Medium)	#102 \$4.50	#103 \$5.00	#104 \$5.10
Shrimp Egg Foo Young(Large)	#112 \$5.25	#113 \$6.00	#114 \$6.10

Add a third item to any combo plate- (\$0.80 medium) (\$1.10 large) all 3 items in same container

Add An Egg Roll to any Combination Plate or Fried Rice for Just 90 cents

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