Celine Yeh
AMST 252
A. Russek
May 30, 2011

A Little Taste of Everything: Redefining "American" Cuisine

The question surrounding whether or not America has its own cuisine has been fiercely debated for many years. Donna Gabaccia argues that what makes American food uniquely "American" is the fact that it draws its origins from multiple ethnicities[1], "boldly [redefining] all imported immigrant fare as American food"[2]. Signs of this multi-ethnic nature of American food were manifested as early as 1796, when the first American cookbook published consisted mainly of recipes that were originally French or British.[3] This was seen as an "attempt to use food as a means to fuse a national identity"[4]. According to Gabaccia, the history of the bagel, which has undergone numerous transformations, is representative of "Americans' shifting, blended, multi-ethnic eating habits"[5]. Furthermore, it "highlights [the] ways [in which] the production, exchange, marketing, and consumption of food have generated new identities"[6]. Bagels became identified as "Jewish" when Jewish bakers in America began selling them in their multi-ethnic vicinities. As bagels became increasingly prevalent in these stores, however, people began to associate them with the typical "New York deli". From then on, bagels

---

[1] Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 225-226.
[2] David Gerard Hogan, review of *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, *Journal of Social History*, 33:4 (1 June 2000).
[3] Mitchell Davis and Anne McBride, *The State of American Cuisine* (The James Beard Foundation, 2008) 2.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 5.
[6] Ibid.

were marketed throughout the country under this newly transformed, regional identity. When international trade introduced the sale of bagels to Israel, they finally came to be identified as a uniquely "American" food.[7] Thus, migration and colonization patterns, which are strongly associated with changes in the production and marketing of food in America, are important catalysts in shaping American identities. In addition, this paper argues that there indeed exists an ethnic "American" cuisine, one that reflects the distinctively American ideals of cultural diversity and acceptance.

The migration of European empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave rise to regional differences in eating habits[8]. A combination of Spanish, African, and native American influences culminated in the birth of "Creole food", characteristic of today's South. Similarly, the settlement of German and Dutch colonies in the Northeast resulted in the creation of "Pennsylvania Dutch" cooking. In the nineteenth century, successive waves of multiple ethnic groups – including Scandinavians, Italians, and Chinese – dramatically changed the eating habits of the respective regions of America to which they migrated as these new immigrants brought with them "the smells and tastes of their homeland cuisines"[9]. Additionally, in those times, different parts of the New World were characterized by a wide variation in natural environments[10], which also accounts for this regional polarization of eating habits. Gabaccia argues that American ethnic cuisine has been shaped by this "regionalism", a claim that has been further reinforced by the

[7] Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 5-6.
[8] Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 7.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Sidney Mintz, "Eating American", in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (Routledge, 2002), 26.

influx of foreign immigrants in the past[11]. She also points out that "even today, we do not expect Iowans to fish for cod, or eat much of it"[12], implying that this concept of regionalism continues to be relevant.

In *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, Sidney Mintz argues that "foods eaten have histories with the pasts of those who eat them"[13], suggesting that individuals tend to employ foods from their ethnic cuisines as strong markers of identity. In *Eating American*, however, Sidney Mintz argues that although America cannot lay claim to an authentic "national" cuisine, it is home to many "regional" cuisines. He asserts that the variety of foodways created by the mixing of influences from these migrant populations "does not equal a cuisine"[14] due to the fact that although "the regional cuisines…have tended to lose some of their distinctiveness in the dilution and 'nationalizing' of regional specialities", a national cuisine has yet to emerge from this process[15]. At one point, he also suggests that a cuisine cannot exist unless "there is a community of people who eat it, cook it, [and] have opinions about it"[16]. However, there seems to be some form of agreement in the general public regarding what constitutes "American" food. For example, in an interview with Mr. Somsanith Nithisack of First of Thai in Fairbault, Minnesota, he narrated that his father, the head chef of the restaurant, "[doesn't] Americanize his own art and dish…but [they] do have kids that come in [who] want

---

[11] Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 7.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 6.
[14] Mintz, *Eating American*, 26.
[15] Mintz, *Eating American*, 29.
[16] Ibid.

ketchup with their chicken fingers"[17]. This suggests, first of all, that there exists a distinctly "American" form of cuisine; and second of all, that "chicken fingers" are popularly thought of as a type of American food. Though Mintz's concept of "regionalism" is certainly characteristic of American foods in general, I argue that it does not preclude Americans from having their own ethnic cuisine.

Prompted by these notions that America lacks a clearly defined cuisine, the James Beard Foundation conducted a survey[18] in which they asked both experts and food lovers the question being examined at hand: Does America have a cuisine? If so, what is it? Michael Stern and Ed Behr, two renowned food pioneers, responded by stating that "there is no single American cuisine, but a plurality of cuisines, instead"[19]. Behr goes on to characterize American eating habits as the expression of "energy, optimism, self-confidence, openness, and eagerness for cultural borrowing"[20]. However, the question of whether or not this propensity to 'mix and match' from the foodways of different cultures can translate into a true "American" cuisine remains. Echoing Behr's comments, Stern suggests that in American cuisine, more emphasis is placed on perpetuating old traditions than on originality[21]. According to Davis and McBride, these responses are representative of the general survey participant population. Moreover, of those who believed that some form of American cuisine exists, a large percentage of them defined it as being "regional". Those who responded negatively expressed that the "diversity" and "regionalism" that characterize American food prevent it from being a genuine, national

[17] Somsanith Nithisack, oral interview, April 25, 2010.
[18] Davis and McBride, *The State of American Cuisine*.
[19] Davis and McBride, *The State of American Cuisine*, 6.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

cuisine. Davis and McBride conclude that for the most part, people agree on the characteristics of American food, but disagree on what constitutes an "American" cuisine. I interpret the results of this survey to mean that in contrast to Mintz's theory, American cuisine is actually a conglomeration of numerous distinct, "regional" styles that come together to form a single cuisine, which has proven to be greater than the sum of its parts. As Davis and McBride put it, "American cuisine is fusion, not confusion; complex, not complicated…Acceptance of its differences and diversity is what it makes it [ethnically] American"[22].

In other words, American cuisine successfully reflects traditional American values of embracing differences and identifying with multiple cultural groups, which likely came about due to migration patterns that occurred within the last three centuries. This is a defining feature of American food that aligns well with Mintz's claim that foods which are part of an ethnic cuisine should have personal histories and meaning attached to them.

In summary, American cuisine can be likened to a Louisiana gumbo[23] – a thick, dark soup made up of a combination of rice, vegetables, meat and seafood – a dish whose only constant feature seems to be variety[24]. Ethnic American cuisine allows its consumers to affiliate with multiple ethnic groups, mixing and matching components of different foodways as they please. In a similar manner, the creator of a traditional gumbo possesses the freedom to throw in whatever he pleases into the pot, creating a dish often

---

[22] Davis and McBride, *The State of American Cuisine*, 11.
[23] Louisiana gumbo, material object.
[24] Huntsman, Mark, "The History of Gumbo", accessed May 20, 2011, http://whatscookingamerica.net/History/GumboHistory.htm.

characterized as a hybrid of numerous cultural influences also largely determined by foreign migration patterns[25]. In other words, what renders our cuisine "American" is its acceptance of the various cultures that it "borrows" from in addition to the freedom it allows us to adopt a broad spectrum of ethnic identities.

[25] Barry Jean Ancelet, Jay Dearborn Edwards, and Glen Pitre, *Cajun Country (Folklife in the South Series)* (University of Mississippi Press, 1991), 137.

Works Cited

Ancelet, Barry Jean, Edwards, Jay Dearborn, and Glen Pitre, *Cajun Country (Folklife in the South Series)*. University of Mississippi Press, 1991.

Davis, Mitchell and Anne McBride, *The State of American Cuisine* (The James Beard Foundation, 2008). (primary source)

Gabaccia, Donna R., *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Hogan, David Gerard, review of *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, *Journal of Social History*, 33:4 (1 June 2000).

Huntsman, Mark, "The History of Gumbo", accessed May 20, 2011, http://whatscookingamerica.net/History/GumboHistory.htm.

Louisiana gumbo, material object.

Mintz, Sidney, "Eating American", in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (Routledge, 2002).

Mintz, Sidney, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

Somsanith Nithisack, oral interview, April 25, 2010. (primary source)