

Charlie Carbery

### The Absence of Organic American Ethnic Cuisine

While there has been significant debate over the role and merit of imported ethnic food as American ethnic food, America has struggled to find a definitive, organic food identity. Instead, America has grown increasingly dependent on “convenience food,” either popped in the microwave or bought via drive-thru. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz argues that this lack of time commitment to creating an organic cuisine is due to a flaw in American preferences that pay little respect to shaping a food identity. In reality, however, Americans lack the time to create an organic cuisine due in large part to the structure and gender of their workforce.

In his *Eating American*, Sidney Mintz first gives a recipe for the creation of an organic, ethnic food, and then argues that America does not have the right ingredients in its national pantry. Mintz writes, “I do not see how a cuisine can exist unless there is a community of people who eat it, cook it, have opinions about it, and engage in dialogue involving those opinions.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to argue that this discourse with food and preparation is almost entirely dependent on the “element of time.”<sup>2</sup> On a basic level, the preparation and consumption of legitimate cuisine in a domestic setting demand a significant time cost. Beyond an investment in preparation and consumption, cuisine creation requires an informed dialogue replete with argument and opinion. Whether it is a family, clan, tribe, or religious group, there is a necessary group element to this dialogue. Ethnic food creation

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<sup>1</sup> Mintz, Sidney. *Food in the USA: A Reader*. Carole M. Caininan. Routledge, 2002. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Mintz. 31.

requires time invested in communal consumption and debate. It is only after a community engages in these necessary steps that cuisine is transformed from a means of sustenance to a legitimate expression of ethnicity and culture.

Mintz places the blame for the lack of an organically American ethnic cuisine on a national shortage of the “time element.” Americans refuse to allocate time to informed dialogue on cuisine, let alone time for preparation or communal consumption. Mintz writes,

“When Americans speak of ‘convenience’ in regard to food, they also mean time. It is simply assumed by most of us that we have too little time and the pressures of busyness in American life is in one sense completely spurious. Americans are repeatedly told that they do not have enough time...As with anything else, not having enough time to eat is a function of how much time is thought to be needed for other things. To take the easiest example, Americans would have more time to cook and eat if they spent less time watching television....Most ‘convenience food’ is successful because of prior conceptions about time. But such food would not succeed if Americans cared more about how and what they ate.<sup>3</sup>

In this argument, Mintz inadvertently engages in an abstract form of economic analysis. He starts with a scarce resource, time; there are only twenty-four hours in a day, seven days in a week. Next, he establishes two goods, food preparation/consumption and television, subject to the budget constraint. If a consumer consumes more of one of these goods, he or she must sacrifice consumption of the other. Finally, Mintz argues that American preferences will lead to a greater consumption of television than food preparation/consumption. Given their preference for television, Americans do not have enough time to allocate

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<sup>3</sup> Mintz. 31.

towards communal preparation, consumption, and discussion necessary for creating an organic ethnic food.

Mintz's model provides a couple of important inferences. By restricting the consumption of "convenience food" to an American consumer, Mintz implies that this set of preferences is uniquely American. Americans simply do not value their food as much as rest of the world. Americans are unusually and inherently predisposed towards a culinary obsession with speed and convenience over quality and community. Mintz's model also gives this American lifestyle a decidedly negative connotation. He deliberately chose to have use television as his archetypal substitute for cuisine creation. The Americans would similarly have more time for food if they eschewed work, exercise, or even reading, but instead Mintz deliberately chose to use television. Mintz's choice of television immediately brings to mind the iconic image of a lazy American, defined by his laziness, obesity, and general lack of intellect. In his model, Mintz presents the typical American as a boorish caricature with a relative disdain for fine cuisine, let alone creating an organic ethnic food identity.

In many ways, the rise of the modern microwave perfectly captures America's obsession with Mintz's "convenience food." Amana's *Radarange Microwave Oven* cooks fast enough to satisfy even the most time-starved American. Specifically, the preset buttons reveal the cuisine of the American microwave diet. "Pizza," "Frozen Diner," "Handy Helper," and "Snack Bar" all have their very own button. A list near the bottom shows that "Chicken Nuggets," "Hot Dogs," and "Frozen Sandwich" can be dialed up using the numerical keypad. The abundance of

frozen food implies the *Radarange Microwave Oven* is used primarily for quick and easy meals. Each programmed food's respective time is set for under six minutes, with Frozen Dinner coming in at a whopping 5:48. The inclusion of "Snack Bar" also suggests that many Americans choose to eschew communal consumption at a customary time for intermittent munching at any free moment. The microwave, a staple of any typical American kitchen, perfectly satisfies the national focus on time and "convenience food."

While Mintz argues that Americans simply do not value cuisine as highly as other cultures, in reality the lack of an organic American ethnic cuisine is due in large part to higher real wages and a the lack of a cultural stigma against women in the labor force. Contrary to Mintz's implication that they spend most of their time away from the table away from perched in front of the television, Americans spend a relatively large amount of time at work. While Western Europe as closed the gap somewhat in recent years, in the year 2000, the average American still worked, on average, 400 more hours than the average German, 250 more hours than the average Frenchman, and 100 more hours than the average Spaniard.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, America has seen a dramatic rise in the female employment rate in the wake of World War II. In fact, from 1948 to 1980, the unemployment gap between men and women steadily decreased. In 1981, male unemployment rose above female unemployment for the first time in US history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Average annual hours actually worked per worker ." May, 20, 2011. <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS> (accessed May, 29, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> DeBoer, Larry. "The female-male unemployment differential : effects of changes in industry employment." 13 (1986): 11.

Mintz's contention that Americans value food preparation, consumption, and community less than other cultures ignores more important contributing factors. While Americans inarguably tend to favor "convenience food," they do not necessarily place a uniquely low value on food identity. Instead Americans value work considerably more than Western Europeans. With the real wage steadily increasing after World War II until 1978, and again from 1990 to 2004, Americans have had increasing incentive to work more and more hours.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that the rise of what Mintz terms "convenience food" is linked with a rising real wage. Americans are choosing to work more in response to basic monetary incentives. With only so many hours in the day, Americans do not have the leftover time to cultivate an organic, ethnic food.

The increasing proportion of women in the workplace in the wake of World War II has also contributed to the absence of a distinctly American food identity. With women out of the home and into offices, factories, and hospitals, Americans lack time to eat meals together at a family table. In his *No Foreign Food*, Richard Pillsbury writes,

...food security has largely been replaced by an unstructured fast-paced feeding schedule. The traditional 'normal' meal with Mom, Dad, and the kids sitting together at the kitchen table at the prescribed time and leisurely consuming a home-prepared meal while discussing the day's events has disappeared from most homes. Indeed, in millions of homes, no more than a meal or two a week is eaten at the table with everyone present...Family members are operating on

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<sup>6</sup> "Wages and Benefits: Real Wages." 2004.<http://www.workinglife.org/wiki/Wages+and+Benefits%3A+Real+Wages+%281964-2004%29> (accessed May 29, 2011).

different schedules more than ever. Children often feed themselves as they get ready for school or day care.<sup>7</sup>

With families traditionally functioning as the dominant social unit in American culture, the absence of the family from the dinner table precludes communal dialogue necessary for creating an ethnic culinary identity. Even when the family can find time to eat together, the absence of the parents for most of the day necessitates the consumption of “convenience food” requiring less of a time commitment.

The lack of an organic American ethnic food is due to a lack of time for necessary preparation, consumption, and discussion. While Sidney Mintz attributes this lack of time to a unique American disdain for cuisine coupled with a devotion to slovenly behavior, in reality there is a much nobler motivation. Americans certainly value the importance of food in cultural identity. However, a rational response to an increasing real wage and a relatively small cultural stigmatism towards women in the workplace leaves no time for the cultivation of an American food identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Pillsbury, Richard. *No Foreign Food*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998. 189.