

Is There Really an American Cuisine?

Whatever happened to the snide comments, the grimaces, and the hopeless shrugs? Those were the familiar signals of distaste that visitors to this country used to display when commenting about food in America. All that seems to be changing now. "I visited your country last year, and I liked the food," a Portuguese lady told me, quite gratuitously, this summer. Owners of some of the highly educated palates in the world make a pilgrimage each springtime to La Louisiane, the New Orleans-style restaurant at the Orly Hilton. The attraction? Soft-shell crabs, flown in from Maryland, and slices of what one headwaiter called "peck-in" (pecan) pie. American hotels abroad have scored with such daring ventures as Le Western in the Paris Hilton, where the menu tempts the French with double spareribs, spit-roasted prairie rabbit, charcoal-broiled and branded "cowboy cuts" of Texas beef, deep-dish apple pie with cheddar cheese, brownies with vanilla ice cream, and Texas bourbon cake.

Europe is eating corn on the cob instead of throwing it to the pigs, and Tokyo's best hotels are serving cheese blintzes and Texas buckwheat pancakes to Oriental as well as American guests. Could we really have established an American way of eating? Louis Szathmary, the cook-

book author who owns Chicago's celebrated restaurant The Bakery, suggests that America's kitchen is kinetic. It has been on the move since New Englanders gave up the farm and went west. When American families are transferred to other parts of the country, recipe swapping is a ritual, whereas French women, deep in culinary tradition, have little reason to be inventive.

No less an authoritative observer than Count Ghislain de Vogüé, head of France's prestigious firm of Moët et Chandon, producers of some of the world's greatest champagnes, has another theory. "First you had to build a nation," he said recently. "Then you had to show your power. Now at last you are learning how to live." To back up the theory, the count has had his company buy California real estate, on which he will begin to grow grapes and produce Moët et Chandon champagne for the American market. All these seem signs that America is at last at home on the range. SR/W has asked writers and connoisseurs in selected parts of the nation to expound, sagely, if briefly, on the contributions that regional kitchens have made to what is emerging—let Georges Auguste Escoffier rest in peace—as *la cuisine Américaine*.

H.S.



Culver Pictures

New England

It was in New England that the main tradition of American cooking got its start. Here the pilgrims learned how to adapt their Old World methods to new and strange foods like the wild turkey, corn, beans and codfish, cranberries and pumpkins. What they couldn't adapt they invented. For by heritage the American cook is far more creative in the kitchen than her French, Italian, or German counterpart.

The early foods that were developed on the primitive pilgrim hearth became a definite part of the New England cuisine. Many are served today in private homes and in country inns and taverns. But in the beginning the early pilgrims had difficult times. They might not have made it through the first bitter winter if it had not been for the friendly American Indians, who were the greatest influence of all.

The basic genesis comprised three native crops—corn, beans, and squash—

which anthropologists call the Indian triad. The knowledge of these crops, which the New England Indian passed on to the pilgrims, represented thousands of years of experiments acquired by cultural diffusion from the center of Indian civilization in faraway Mexico. There the pre-Columbian Indians had discovered, developed, and cultivated such foods as tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, corn, and vanilla and cocoa beans.

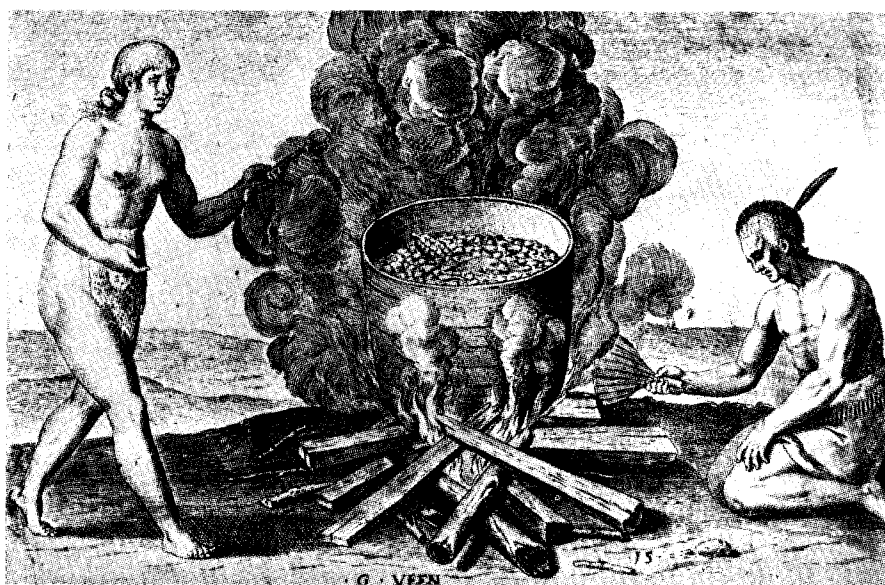
From a wild grass (*Euchlaena mexicana*), the Mexican Indians had developed maize (*Zea mays*), giving the world one of its most valuable crops and finest foods. Fortunately corn was acceptable to the New England climate, for the wheat and peas brought from old England were not successful.

The New England Indians not only showed the pilgrims how to plant corn, fish, farm, and find what was edible, but they also taught them how to cook it. They demonstrated ways to steam clams, lobsters, and fish on the beach in heated

Cointreau...the art of lingering.

No one wants the evening to end when there's friendship, good conversation and Cointreau. Crystal clear, lighter, drier Cointreau — the liqueur laced with the subtle hint of orange. Pronounced "Kwan-tro."





Culver Pictures

Indians cooking corn—From these origins came grits, corn bread, and mush.

rocks and seaweed; to cook several kinds of beans in one pot without meat for succotash; to bake beans in a bean hole in the ground; to pick fresh corn and boil it before the sugar turned to starch and to eat it right off the cob.

The early housewife adapted such techniques and methods that proved practical and invented several ways of cooking of her own. The problem of baking bread on an open fire, for example, was solved in several ingenious ways. Although bread has been made on open fires for centuries, New Englanders came up with new methods. They put the soft dough into a tin or cloth and suspended it over boiling water. They went further: Instead of the traditional flour, water, and salt dough, they made bread a nutritious food by adding egg, molasses, corn meal, and raisins. The result was corn bread and traditional brown bread, served with Boston baked beans.

The soil and the sea were important factors in developing characteristic cookery in New England, and the early settlers soon learned to use the indigenous, tart cranberry; syrup from the maple trees; blueberries; and the abundant sea food, especially fresh and salted cod. The early dishes are well known today. It's a tossup whether New England cooking spread the fame of Thanksgiving or whether the holiday made the culinary dishes famous.

Only a mention of such traditional foods as New England boiled dinner, clambakes, chowders, fish cakes, buckwheat cakes, flapjacks, Indian pudding,

johnnycake, baked beans, brown bread, mince and pumpkin pie, and blueberry slump or grunt produces a wave of nostalgia from anyone who has ever spent a summer or a weekend in the area.

Old-time New Englanders were also great pie makers and pickle makers. In this case climate was the mother of invention. They often would bake as many as 100 pies at a time, freezing them in the snow and stacking them for later use.

This is perhaps what is most American about the American cuisine—the inventiveness born of necessity. The settlers not only devised cooking techniques but the utensils in which to cook food and the methods of keeping it for later use. This creativity continued and spread as many New Englanders left their farms and traveled West, taking along their recipes and kitchen garden seeds. Americans still follow this custom. As a husband gets transferred from Boston to Houston, wives swap their favorite recipes with the neighbors next door, who may have moved from Kansas City or from California.

PHYLLIS HANES

The South

Southern cuisine is a blending of food habits of many people—English, Scots-Irish, Spanish, Negro, and Indian. Necessity itself has melded these several cuisines over the years into a cooking style and form identifiably Southern. The adaptation of species of vegetables, herbs, and spices found only in the South gave those dishes from many countries their regional flavor.

Corn was perhaps the one food that altered the diets of Southern settlers. It is still prominent in the Southern kitchen three centuries later.

Grits is the mainstay of the Southern breakfast, and corn breads of some form are served in most homes every day. Before new lands were opened up and before the growing of wheat, corn had to substitute as both a bread staple and a vegetable. Hence the dependence on this food for corn bread dressing, corn dumplings for the native and cultivated greens, and corn pudding. It is even an ingredient in the popular Southern chess pie!

Besides providing food for the table, corn was used to fatten livestock. The hog was quickly and easily raised and became a favorite meat. For many years, when a Southerner spoke of "meat," he meant pork. Fat back or hog jowls are used to flavor many vegetables, and few households will let New Year's Day pass without serving black-eyed peas and hog jowls for good luck. The rind from the fat meat is cooked down to furnish cracklings for yet another favorite corn bread.

Since all of the pork could not be eaten fresh and did not lend itself to drying, as did venison and beef from some of the scattered herds, a method of salt curing was developed, which gave us the country hams typical of the Southern region.

With the introduction of tobacco and cotton as money crops, new settlers built large plantations, and diversified the crops. Cane was one of these crops, and molasses became the sweetener to add to the native honey gathered from the woods. Molasses is still the special ingredient in pecan pies, pound cakes, ginger cookies, and many other Southern dessert favorites.

The South is famous for its stews. No doubt the origin of each stew depended on the meats and vegetables available in the area. Both Virginia and Georgia claim the origin of Brunswick stew, the basis of which was originally squirrel, if the hunter happened to have luck on his hunting expedition; a rabbit or two might have been substituted. Today's homemakers make the same stew with beef, pork, or lamb, using essentially the same seasonings, vegetables, and favorite spices. Another noted Southern stew is Kentucky Burgoo. It took many trials and errors to cut down the original recipe for family-sized servings. The original measures call for enough to serve 500.

The Germans brought to the South the recipe for Indian pudding, which uses both corn meal and molasses. Plum pud-