

The Complications and Interactions Surrounding American Cuisine

What is American Cuisine? This question has long been debated with many results. Some believe that there is an American Cuisine, while others believe that it does not exist. The book *What the World Eats* by Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisio attempts to tackle the question by providing three different case studies of American families and what they eat. While the book provides insight, it also demonstrates how complicated answering the question of whether or not there is an American Cuisine can be.

Determining if there is an American Cuisine is greatly complicated by America's geography, racial diversity, regional food and immigration history. However, despite these complications it is an important question to ask because having or lacking an American Cuisine affects how we interact with the rest of the world.

Before moving further it is important to note the difference between American cuisine and American food. American food comprises the singular food items that are uniquely American, such as hamburgers, hotdogs, apple pie, and New England clam chowder. However, a collection of American food does not necessarily an American cuisine make. Generally cuisine is considered to be "the foods and method of preparation traditional to [the American] region or population."ⁱ Thus, an American cuisine implies a variety of different foods that can have cultural importance to the American populace. However this concept grows complicated as Krishnendu Ray shows in his article "Nation and Cuisine" which demonstrates that people have different views about what constitutes a cuisine from people being engaged in a dialogue about the food, to "a product of agricultural abundance and availability"ⁱⁱⁱ to cuisine being "the product of attitudes which gives first place to the real place of consuming food."ⁱⁱⁱ Another author views cuisine as

“a process which involves several distinct products, specific functions and separate actors.”^{iv} Thus, the first complication to finding a solution to the question of if there is an American cuisine stems from the vast array of theoretical frameworks that one’s definition of a cuisine can create.

What the World Eats by Peter Menzel and Faith D’Aluisio contains photographs of “families throughout the world posed with a display of all the foods they eat in an entire week.”^v Within the book three different case studies of the United States are presented: the Cavens of California, the Revises of North Carolina, and the Fernandezes of Texas. Upon initial study of the images it becomes apparent that all of the families buy and consume many of the same basic food items such as: eggs, milk, cheese, juice, bananas and chicken. The families also share similarities in non-basic items such as: Coca-Cola, Capri Sun juice drink, prepared pizza, and McDonalds take out. Although these similarities exist they do not necessarily point to an American cuisine because each family while beginning with similar ingredients can produce very different meals. All the families consume cheese but in distinct ways, the Fernandezes use the cheese to make quesadillas with the fresh corn tortillas they make every week,^{vi} which neither of the other two families do. While there are similarities among American families there are also vast differences, which makes it difficult to identify a cohesive American cuisine.

When examining these case studies some of the complications in the determination of an American cuisine become apparent, but they do not arise from the food, but rather from who was represented. The book presents the three families, one white, one African American, and one Hispanic. Whites account for 72% of the American population, African Americans account for 12% and Hispanics account for 13%.^{vii} These case studies represent a majority of the American population. Yet by only

representing the majority they ignore other distinct minority groups such as Asians who could have different eating habits than the other families. The three families are from California, Texas and North Carolina. These three states are representative of only 23% of the total population.^{viii} The case studies ignore whole regions such as the North East, which contains 19% of the country's population, and the Midwest, another 12% of the population.^{ix} In total 77% of the population remains unrepresented by the case studies. Since the American population is so diverse this means that many foods and habits are completely ignored. While the case studies can be said to represent a majority, there are so many diverse ethnic and geographic groups with distinct eating habits and foods that it is hard to synthesize them all into a singular American cuisine. Accordingly, it is difficult to identify an American cuisine.

America is geographically diverse. The three case studies represent only a fraction of the regions that make up America. This is important due to the fact that "different regions of ... the United States gave rise to somewhat different diets."^x This is because there is a "wide variation in natural environments"^{xi} which in turn means a wide variety in what specific regions can grow, and in the end, eat. One can more readily talk about regional American cuisines, because within one region the same food tends to be available and typically the same methods of preparation are used. The distinction in regional foods complicates the definition of American cuisine because food eaten in the south such as spicy Cajun food would not be eaten often in the Midwest where less seasoned dishes are popular. Thus on a regional scale it is relatively easier to consolidate the food practices but synthesis of all the regions into a defined national concept is much more difficult. It is important to note that regional cuisines act similarly to the way national cuisines do in the sense that they are a method of exchange between the two

regions. If someone wants to learn about or explore a new region but cannot travel there they will probably try to interact with that region through it is food. This phenomenon of exchange occurs on a national level and part of why answering the question of the existence of an American Cuisines so important.

Another significant complication is the history of immigration in America. Almost everyone in the United States can be considered an immigrant or at least a descendent of an immigrant. Even today “movement of new people, especially to the United States, has literally never ceased”^{xii} and “the origins of the newcomers have become much more diverse.”^{xiii} This great influx of immigrants throughout the history of the United States has meant an influx of ethnic foods in the American diet. This phenomenon complicates the discussion of American cuisine because it triggers a debate about whether or not these ethnic foods should be included since they are a prevalent part of American eating habits, even though they already form parts of another national cuisine. This then also affects how our cuisine would interact with other cultures, because if our cuisine were to include all the ethnic food within America much of our cuisine would be considered unauthentic knockoffs of the original cuisine. This perception could then strengthen the belief that the U.S does what it wishes because we just co-opt what we desire from others. Thus what is included in the realm of American Cuisine could greatly impact the way others interact with us. Another complication that arises from this variety of ethnic food is that it leads to even more diversity in foods consumed in the country, which makes it harder to determine a singular national cuisine. Some argue that the great variety is what determines our cuisine because it represents the great diversity of the nation, while others opine that: “variety does not equal a cuisine, and is not the same

as a cuisine.”^{xiv} The country’s immigration history and resulting prevalence of ethnic foods confounds the challenge of identifying a single national cuisine.

The three case studies in *What the World Eats* help demonstrate why it is so hard to answer the question of is there an American Cuisine. Even though it is difficult to find a clear response to the question, it nevertheless is an important question to try to answer. Some believe that if “we [have] no cuisine, ... we [have] no culture.”^{xv} Others argue that having a cuisine is important because it “becomes a means of self-identity as well as a group-membership card.”^{xvi} These are important statements because a culture’s cuisine is typically the first encounter someone will have with a new culture since it is one of the simplest exchanges. Everyone can enjoy food and it is familiar to everyone because “foods are not inherently strange or exotic.”^{xvii} International festivals, for example, are typically centered on food. Whether or not we have a cuisine affects our ability to express and exchange our culture easily. If we have no cuisine, especially if it is then believed that we then have no culture, there would be no real method to exchange with other cultures, because we would have nothing to exchange. The lack of an identified cuisine may also undermine other attributes of American culture, including literature, film and political ideals. Conversely if it is believed that we have a cuisine then by the same argument we have a culture and therefore not only an easy initial method of exchange but also an intricate set of cultural products and values to exchange. Based on these arguments, the question of the existence of an American cuisine may well have a significant impact on how and what interactions occur between the U.S and the rest of the world. Lisa Hsia stated in her article “Eating the Exotic,” “a fondness for the tastes of a foreign cuisine can convince us to look more favorably upon the people of that region.”

xviii

Answering the question of whether an American cuisine exists is difficult, due to all the nuances and complications that must be faced. Yet it is important that we continue to attempt to find the answer since whether or not we have a cuisine affects how America and the world can interact. If we cannot figure out an answer to whether or not there is an American cuisine then Americans foods will potentially remain in the position of our principal ambassadors to the world, leaving McDonalds as one of our main exports rather than our literature or political ideals.

ⁱ "Cuisine." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Krishnendu Ray. "Nation and Cuisine. The Evidence from American Newspapers Ca. 1830-2003." *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 4 (2008): 261.

ⁱⁱⁱ Krishnendu Ray. "Nation and Cuisine," 262.

^{iv} Priscilla P. Clark. "Thoughts for Food, I: French Cuisine and French Culture." *The French Review* 49, no. 1 (1975): 32.

^v Menzel, Peter, and Faith D'Aluisio. *Hungry Planet*: Ten Speed Press, pg7.

^{vi} Faith D'Aluisio and Peter Menzel. *What the World Eats*. 1st ed. New York: Tricycle Press, 2008 pg151.

^{vii} U.S Census Bureau. "Population by Hispanic or Latino Origin and by Race for the United States: 2000 and 2010." 2010.

^{viii} "2010 U.S Census Data." (2010).

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Sidney Mintz. "Eating American." In *Food in the Usa: A Reader*, edited by Carole M. Cainihan, 23-33: Routledge, 2002, pg26.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Sidney Mintz. "Eating American," pg25.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Sidney Mintz. "Eating American," pg26.

^{xv} Sidney Mintz. "Eating American," pg3.

^{xvi} Susan Kalcik. "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity." In *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, edited by Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, 37-65: University of Tennessee Press, 1984, pg54.

^{xvii} Lucy M. Long. "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness." In *Culinary Tourism*, edited by Lucy M. Long, 20-50: University Press of Kentucky, 2004, pg24.

^{xviii} Hsia, Lisa L. "Eating the Exotic." In *Clio's Scroll*, 2003, pg 17.

References:

"2010 U.S Census Data." (2010). <<http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>>.

Bureau, U.S Census. "Population by Hispanic or Latino Origin and by Race for the United States: 2000 and 2010." 2010.

-
- Capaldi, Elizabeth D. "Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating." Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 1996.
- Clark, Priscilla P. "Thoughts for Food, I: French Cuisine and French Culture." *The French Review* 49.1 (1975): 32-41. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/389684>>.
- "Cuisine." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2011.
- D'Aluisio, Faith., and Peter. Menzel. *What the World Eats*. 1st ed. New York: Tricycle Press, 2008.
- Hsia, Lisa L. "Eating the Exotic." *Clio's Scroll*. 2003.
- Kalcik, Susan. "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity." *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*. Eds. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell: University of Tennessee Press, 1984. 37-65.
- Long, Lucy M. "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness." *Culinary Tourism*. Ed. Lucy M. Long: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. 20-50.
- Menzel, Peter., and Faith. D'Aluisio. *Hungry Planet*. Ten Speed Press.
- Mintz, Sidney. "Eating American." *Food in the USA: A Reader*. Ed. Carole M. Cainihan: Routledge, 2002. 23-33.
- Ray, Krishnendu. "Nation and Cuisine. The Evidence From American Newspapers Ca. 1830-2003." *Food and Foodways* 16.4 (2008): 259-97. <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=3e252bc2-d104-482b-8f57-5c6a754983f1%40sessionmgr104&vid=2&hid=104>>.

Photographs Analyzed from *What the World Eats*:



The Fernandezes of Texas (page 148)



The Cavens of California (page 140)



The Revises of North Carolina (page 144)