Memphis, New York, and New Orleans, Asian American fusion cuisines have been garnering more national attention and are celebrated as the cuisine of choice for cosmopolitan urban dwellers. A wave that swept through California and the west coast in the 1980s in the form of Japanese-French or Chinese-Italian-French restaurants, fusion cuisine began making a mark on east coast culinary culture in the 1990s. Beginning in the late 1990s and continuing into the early millennial years, fusion cuisine restaurants have been proliferating in metropolitan cities, and are now also becoming a presence in smaller U.S. towns and cities.

The burgeoning popularity of fusion cuisine in urban metropolises can be understood as part of the trend toward high-income gentrification within certain sectors of the urban landscape in global cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo. Saskia Sassen (1991) usefully explores the types of class differentials that sustain the demand for "cuisine," rather than "food" (341) in these urban spaces. She describes this emergent class of "spenders," high-income workers with a propensity to spend rather than save or invest their disposable income, as important players in the market for highly priced goods and services. She connects their consumption patterns and demand with the presence of an immigrant working class, often from Asia and the Caribbean, hypothesizing that "economic inequality in major cities has assumed distinct forms in the consumption structure, which in turn has a feedback effect on the organization of work and the types of jobs being created. There is an indirect creation of low-wage jobs induced by the presence of a highly dynamic sector with a polarized income distribution. It takes place in the sphere of consumption (or social reproduction)" (285). Sassen describes this type of "high-income gentrification" as labor intensive. "Behind the gourmet stores and specialty boutique," she argues, "lies an organization of the work process that differs from the self service supermarket and department store" (285). Gentrified classes in these cities that demand varied cuisines in restaurants exert a new type of pressure on the service sector that makes it necessary for Asian immigrants, for instance, to satisfy the demand of high-income gentrified workers located amid the "new cosmopolitan work culture" (341). In the late 1990s, fusion cuisine experienced a boom, with new restaurants opening their doors to restaurant goers demanding varied and innovative approaches to cuisine.

But as a new class of restaurant goers emerges, a new type of cooking show has also emerged on television. In particular, the Food Network has brought fusion cuisine into living rooms in Middle America, and nonurban...
centers. But the show that has made fusion cuisine an Asian American phenomenon is that hosted by Ming Tsai, the Asian American poster boy of cooking. Tsai’s fusion cuisine show, East Meets West, has catapulted him into popularity, earning him accolades in the food and beverage industry as well as a large fan base. The far less visible but equally interesting on-screen presence of Padma Lakshmi, host of the show Padma’s Passport, provides additional food for thought in conceptualizing the relationship between Asian Americans and fusion. Although it may be too soon to claim that fusion cuisine is an Asian American phenomenon, the fact that two prominent Asian Americans who embody the model minority stereotype dish up fusion cuisine on their respective cooking shows, week after week, warrants close analysis. With this in mind, I explore how Ming Tsai and Padma Lakshmi’s respective cooking shows espouse a politics of assimilable fusion: a politics of culinary that celebrates fusion cuisine because of the seeming ease with which Asian American personalities assimilate the tastes of their “ethnicity” with mainstream culinary fare.

Fusion cuisine’s tendency to meld and assimilate difference into a coherent whole can be usefully contrasted with definitions of liberal, inclusive multiculturalism. According to Lisa Lowe, multiculturalism “assert[s] that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusion by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion” (1996: 86). Heeding Lowe’s cautionary remarks about multiculturalism, this essay argues that it is important to understand the sociopolitical conditions that render fusion possible when analyzing the popular presence of Asian American culinary culture in the mainstream media. I juxtapose the work of two ambassadors of Asian American culinary culture who currently host cooking shows on the Food Network, Ming Tsai and Padma Lakshmi, to explore how the public performance of racialized gendered national identity maps onto the public performance of culinary. While the history of fusion cuisine is different from that of race in the United States, the rhetorical strategies used to describe fusion as a form of culinary multiculturalism can be better understood by placing it in the context of the racial and ethnic debates about diversity, difference, and assimilation in the United States without necessarily creating a homology between race on the one hand and culinary practices on the other. In juxtaposing the rhetoric of fusion cuisine with the rhetoric of popular and legal discourse around race and ethnicity in Asian America, I debunk the myth that fusion culinary dis-course can be separated from the political terrain on which consumers of fusion cuisine are located.

Chopsticks and Forks: Ming’s Culinary Quests

Ming Tsai, author of the award-winning cookbook, Blue Ginger (1999)—named for his restaurant in affluent Wellesley, Massachusetts—and host of the Food Network shows East Meets West and Ming’s Quest, is the face of fusion cuisine in Asian America. East Meets West, one of the first cooking shows to showcase fusion cuisine hosted by an Asian American, promises to combine the best of both worlds, “Eastern” and “Western.” Breaking with the earlier mold available to Asian American cooking show hosts, most notably Martin Yan, Ming Tsai presents cuisine in innovative ways, attempting to chronicle the diverse ways in which Asian tastes can mingle with the “American” palate. The “East-West” fusion cuisine he presents on the half-hour show is a combination of “Western” cuisine infused with Asian spices and herbs. Dishes such as “Tea-Smoked Salmon with Wasabi Potato Latkes and Fuji Apple Salad” or “Asian Lacquered Poussin with Hoisin Lime Sauce” are just some of Tsai’s fusion culinary offerings. But what exactly is fusion, and how do shows like East Meets West espouse its high-class ideals? Norman Van Aken, who takes credit for having invented the term “fusion cuisine,” defines it as “a harmonious combination of foods of various origins.” Offering the more precise term that circulates in the restaurant industry, Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page define fusion as “a melding together of the cuisines of more than one country” in a single dish.1

Ming Tsai offers a slightly different take on fusion cuisine. According to him “‘so called’ fusion cooking produces chaos on the plate and in the mouth. This results from not respecting a culture’s ingredients and the traditional techniques that turn them into wonderful eating. Successful East-West cooking finds just the right harmonious way to combine distinct culinary approaches. When a dish is not just new—but better—when I can find a superior way to celebrate oxtail’s earthiness, say, or the deep sour tang of preserved lemons, and then join the two—that’s real East-West cuisine.” 2 Tsai’s definition, however, is still coated in terms of the promise of inclusion; as a colleague commented, rarely do we see “true” fusion on the show. Ming Tsai will often prepare a dish, and then pour lychee honey over it, as if that superficial coating with a purportedly
Asian ingredient makes for fusion. In almost all the recipes included in his book, as well as on the show, Tsai muses on how ingredients from the “East” can make “Western” cuisine better, alerting us to the uneven flows between “East” and “West.”

Like many of the cooking shows that have begun to gain popularity on the Food Network, the chef is a central part of the show’s narrative. Ming Tsai is presented as a young, cosmopolitan Asian American subject who does away with traditional boundaries between “East” and “West,” making him a formidable ambassador for fusion cuisine. He is equally at home in both worlds—a point driven home by the thirty-second opening sequence to the show. It begins with Tsai attired in white “Oriental” garb sitting in lotus position with his eyes closed, apparently doing yoga. Accompanying this shot is slow, serene instrumental “Oriental” music. The music abruptly changes, and we are brought into a fast-paced contemporary “American” world that shows Tsai clad in sporty whites, playing racquetball. This change in scene is accompanied by a change in music. The serene music gives way to a more energetic and lively music (with Asian undertones), suggesting that, in addition to moving spatially from a spiritual Asian place to a multicultural United States, we have moved forward in time. In the next few shots Ming Tsai is seen selecting spices, produce, and meat in the Asian market and the American grocery store. He is then seen riding his bicycle down the streets of Boston’s Chinatown and pulling up to a suburban home in a sports utility vehicle. The shot closes with Ming Tsai in traditional clothing. As he rises, he brings his palms together, and the camera cuts to the words “East Meets West” with chopsticks and a fork symmetrically framing the words. In this short sequence, Ming Tsai is portrayed as a remarkably dexterous character. Because he moves in and out of stereotypically “Eastern” and “Western” worlds he can presumably be relied on to create true fusion between east and west. Ming Tsai personifies fusion, and is what happens when east meets west—or so this sequence would have us believe.

While the opening sequence highlights Tsai’s ability to travel rapidly between east and west, it also places him within a classed framework. He is depicted in a series of leisure activities—yoga, squash, shopping, driving an SUV, riding a bike for pleasure rather than as a mode of transportation—that complement his interest in the gourmet-style cuisine showcased on East Meets West. Through his cooking shows, as well as his restaurant, he can provide the type of cuisine demanded by his young, high-income, gentrified customers because he is socially and economically on par with them, and with those who consume fusion cuisine. At the same time, he is not exactly breaking bread with his clientele. He cooks for them, he looks beautiful for them, and he performs for them. To this end, selling Ming Tsai as a model minority is a crucial ingredient in making Tsai successful. Eric Ober, president and general manager of the Food Network, begins his afterword to Tsai’s book by asking, “How many Yale graduates with engineering degrees and professional squash careers go on to win an Emmy award? Then again, how many of them have their own award winning restaurants?” (Tsai and Boehm 1999: i) as if to suggest that Tsai is the model minority extraordinaire, or as A. Magazine put it, “the Asian American poster boy of cooking.”

Ming Tsai is presented as the all-American male who chooses to make culinarity a vocation. Starting from humble beginnings in Dayton, Ohio, where he excelled in his studies, he went on to receive an Ivy League education, earning an engineering degree and a hotel and restaurant administration degree. Then he trained at prestigious cooking schools and restaurants. Ming Tsai thus embodies the model minority stereotype. He is upwardly mobile, well assimilated, does not talk about unpleasant racial experiences, and apparently seems to have made it in the United States.

Unlike the traditionally effeminized and desexualized Asian American, Ming Tsai exudes charisma and sex appeal. People Magazine included Ming Tsai on its list of the “Fifty Most Beautiful People in the World” for the year 2000, describing him as a “Chunk”—chef as hunk, a phrase coined by Heidi Diamond, an executive at the Food Network, Ming Tsai’s employer. His fans have also been quick to pick up on his sexual appeal; in addition to watching the show to see how Ming Tsai creates culinary fusion, fans are interested in seeing Ming. On the Food Network fan forum devoted to Ming Tsai, for instance, one fan articulately comments, “Ming is a talented babe with a great personality :) Woo Hoo.” Another notes, “Wow I love this show!! Plus he looks Hot in that one pair of shorts he wore when he went to Hawaiii! (sorry I can’t help it I think he’s hot! And not a bad cook there!!)” and another fan poetically waxes, “I believe Ming is a great chef with a vast knowledge of gastronomy, he has a great show in which the viewers learn a lot, and he is cute to boot.” To some of his Asian American fans, this is cause enough for celebration. One fan comments, “I’m very proud of you and your heritage, you are a great example of good breeding,” while another notes, “He is quite good looking . . . more than that, he’s extremely talented, I think people need to see more
positive examples of Asian men, he's very smart also. You know he graduated from Yale."

If *East Meets West* portrays Tsai as the assimilated model minority who can bring both worlds—"Asian" and "American"—together, his newer television show *Ming's Quest* adds another dimension to his onscreen persona, casting him as the "American" who enjoys the great outdoors and has time for fun and relaxation. Unlike *East Meets West*, this show takes place outside the studio kitchen, in a range of on-site locations including Bali, Indonesia, Hawaii, and Northern Vermont. The show portrays Ming Tsai as equally at home on the range and behind the kitchen range. In his quest for "better" food, Ming Tsai pushes the frontiers of cooking, searching and hunting—that most masculine of activities—and transforms wild creatures such as Balinese duck, Alaskan blue mussels, or Vermont trout into delectable dishes, fused with the tastes of the "East." Not only can he travel between East and West, but he can do so while maintaining a solid masculinist image.

At one level the show breaks with the stereotypical image of Asian cooks. Ming Tsai is not the humbling idiot who prepares egg foo young and chop suey and cannot speak English. Nor does he conjure up images of the offensive "heathen Chinee" stereotypes that have long been associated with Asian American men who cook, nor for that matter does he resemble his most immediate predecessor Martin Yan who speaks in heavily accented English and seems an irreducibly foreign and desexualized comic character. He is presented as the future of America—a figure who takes the "best" of the East and incorporates it into his Western culinary offerings. In this way, Ming Tsai emerges as the model minority chef who inhabits a newer stereotype—that of the hyperassimilated, attractive, and yupified Asian American who seamlessly integrates into American cultural life.

"Sexy Dishes": Padma's Passport

If Ming Tsai emerges as the all-American man who understands and who belongs in a multiethnic America, Padma Lakshmi, the other Asian American who appears with some regularity on the Food Network, is presented as a new breed of American for whom race is irrelevant because she embodies the vision of a transnational multicultural America. On the cover of her cookbook, *Easy Exotic: Low-Fat Recipes from Around the World* (1999), is a photograph of sumptuous fruit hanging in clusters from a fruit vendor's cart. Posing in front of the fruit is a woman with dark hair that falls to her shoulders. The cover image combines food and sensuality with exoticism and suggests that the book will offer easy strategies for consuming delectable images of alterity. But the female figure centrally positioned on the cover of the book is racially ambiguous. Although her name, Padma Lakshmi, suggests that she is ethnically South Asian, her light skin and dark hair frame her as "exotically ethnic."

In the opening pages of the book Padma shares nostalgic memories of growing up and learning to cook in the company of female relatives in South India, thus establishing her connection to Indianess. The division of the book into sections on Spain, France, Italy, India, Asia, and Morocco (in that order), however, undercuts notions of rigid nationality while still using national categories. Deliberately situating itself at the crossroads of national culinary culture, the cookbook is not engaged in producing a national narrative that seeks to understand how and where the chef fits into a vision of a multicultural United States. Rather, the text produces a flexible, transnational narrative marking Padma Lakshmi's emergence as a cosmopolitan and mobile South Asian American subject who travels easily between cultures and nations. Her public image on Internet websites, cooking shows, and in her cookbook, *Easy Exotic*, frames her as part of a class of young and mobile South Asian Americans raised in the United States who are not bounded by class, citizenship, or national belonging; she effortlessly slides in and out of ethnic and national contexts while consistently maintaining a purportedly exotic ethnic appeal.

Although Padma Lakshmi, a model, actress, and host of a cooking show, does not own her own restaurant, she is more of a media presence in public cultural circuits than South Asian restaurateurs, or established chefs and culinary authors such as Madhur Jaffrey and Julie Sahni. Her background in modeling, her ability to speak five languages (European and South Asian), and her racially ambiguous appearance position her as a formidable ambassador for (Indian) fusion culinary culture. Her cooking show, *Padma's Passport*, a segment of *Melting Pot*, is described as "a culinary passport to the rich heritage of our country." Like her cookbook, the show claims to break down national boundaries. Generally organized around a specific topic, either showcasing types of food to be consumed and prepared for special occasions and outings such as picnic lunches, light summer fare, and aphrodisiacal food, each episode creates culinary fusion by juxtaposing dishes from disparate national culinary cultures.
Unlike many other culinary show hosts, including industry stalwarts such as Emeril Lagasse, Ming Tsai, or Martha Stewart, Padma does not navigate the kitchen with ease. Using metal utensils on nonstick pans, emptying the blades of the food processor into the saucepan along with the blended sauce, turning a blender on with the lid open are all culinary faux-pas made by Lakshmi during the half-hour show that airs on the Food Network. Using campy humor to detract from her apparent inability to navigate the kitchen, her comment, “I do know how to use this” punctures a moment in the narrative when she struggles to fit the lid to a blender. Such moments attest to her discomfort in the kitchen, at least in the onscreen version of the kitchen.7 For the most part, vegetables, fruit, and meat are presliced and spices and herbs are heaped on a plate in the correct quantities—all that is left for her to do is to chop and slice the occasional vegetable and then assemble the dishes and present a completed version of the dish to eager viewers at home. So, if viewers are not tuning in to see culinary wizardry, what is the appeal of this show?

Judging from audience comments posted to the on-line fan forum for Padma’s Passport, viewers are not watching the show merely to learn about the intricacies of Indian, Spanish, French, or Moroccan cuisine; they are tuning in to watch Padma. As one fan on the Food Network’s on-line fan forum gushes, “Padma is awesome. And I’m not just saying that because I’m a guy. I mean she can cook, present herself articulately, yet be revealing all at the same time. What an Indian fox. [Sic] Oh yea, and the foods she cooks look slammin’. Why not show more, and I do mean more of Padma; Please!” Another fan writes, “Padma is the best and sexist girl on TV, keep up the good work baby doll, everybody loves you.”8 Transformed into a latterly sexualized object by her on-line fan base, Lakshmi’s good looks and “ethnic-exotic” appeal are an integral part of the show’s narrative. In producing a palatably exotic version of alterity, Padma herself becomes one of the main ingredients of the show. Like the food she prepares on the show, she herself is commodifiable, consumable, and desirable.

Reinforcing the idea that she is one of the consumable ingredients of her book dished up for hungry viewers, tantalizing images of sumptuous food alternate with images of Padma Lakshmi seductively kneading pastry dough or shopping for vegetables in body-hugging clothing. Lakshmi’s image on the show is also deliberately sexualized. Typically, she wears revealing outfits—leather pants, short T-shirts exposing her midriff, tight sleeveless dresses, low-cut blouses—not typically associated with the “sensible clothing” style of most Food Network stars. Audiences tuning in to see Padma are also consuming other images of Padma Lakshmi present in cyberspace. Numerous websites (primarily based in Italy, where Lakshmi worked as a model) catalog photographs of her work as nude model.9 These overtly sexualized images of Lakshmi in cyberspace offer an additional point of entry into understanding how and why the conflation of sex, sensuality, and food enhance Lakshmi’s popularity. Sexually explicit photographs play up her ambiguous “exoticism,” rendering it difficult to read these particular photographs of her solely in terms of any particular national, racial, or ethnic background.

Fan groups have been quick to notice Lakshmi’s sex appeal. At the time of writing, there were three discussion groups hosted at yahoogroups.com devoted to Padma Lakshmi: Padma Lakshmi’s Lotus Oasis (1,441 members), the Padma Lakshmi Fan Club (1,076 members), and Padma Lakshmi (27 members).10 But unlike many on-line discussion groups devoted to discussing specific ideas about the show or the host, these groups feature minimal discussion. When the rare conversation does take place, it is often to alert other members that Padma Lakshmi is making an appearance on a television show, or that new photographs—usually partial or full frontal nudes—have been uploaded to the website. Indeed, the primary feature of each group is the extensive section of photos archived in the “photos” section of each website. As access to such features is limited to members only, one has to have membership in the particular group to download images of Padma Lakshmi. Most subscribers opt to be anonymous and while this prevents them from posting messages to the group, it does not prevent them from accessing the photos. By their own admission (via postings), the subscribers are not interested in cooking, or in creating a larger on-line community.

When aspects of Padma’s Passport are discussed, the focus is entirely on Padma’s appearance. As one subscriber writes, “Padma on the food network . . . on the show “Melting Pot” today! She wore skintight leather pants with a skintight shirt that showed her tummy and no bra! Her breasts were hanging out every time she bent over to cook something. She made food for lovers aphrodisiac [sic] foods! And at one point was licking chocolate off her finger! You’ve got to see her live!” (October 11, 2001, Padma Lakshmi’s Lotus Oasis discussion group). Such voyeurism is unusual, as subscribers rarely share details about their observations in this forum. In part this is because most subscribers remain anonymous and are therefore prohibited from posting messages, but it is also a response to the list moderator’s call for nonmisogynistic postings. In the introductory
message, he writes, “I will update new PICS as I find them and ask you to do the same. I would like to limit the public posts to a ‘NOT TOO MASCULINIST’ [sic] level. There are other clubs that will be more than happy to fulfill this need of yours!” Thus while the rampant but private consumption of pornographic images is accepted, public discussions of sexual fantasies are strictly prohibited.

Fans may seem to converge in their readings of Padma, but unraveling the often contradictory representations of Lakshmi and Tsai is complicated precisely because they are both the “exotic ethnic” other and the assimilated model minority. Lakshmi is the alluring temptress who is a cosmopolitan world traveler and still remembers her roots. Ming Tsai is the hyperassimilated Asian American but is also comfortable with his traditional upbringing in an immigrant Taiwanese American family. While the shows have worked against the traditional invisibility of Asian American bodies in public culture, the uncomplicated and commodifiable image of ethnicity raises the question of whether inclusive representation that renders race invisible, and even irrelevant, is necessarily positive.

Indeed, the question of race being rendered invisible for new(er) cosmopolitan subjects is the topic of the now (in)famous 1993 Time cover with the headline, “The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society.” The cover displays the computer-generated image of a woman who, although only 15 percent Anglo-Saxon, has, as Victor Burgin writes, “the appearance of a White woman recently returned from a holiday on the Mediterranean” (1996: 259). Although Lakshmi does not have the appearance of being “white,” she bears an uncanny resemblance to the computer-generated woman heralded as the future face of “America” insofar as her South Asianness is never fully fixed. While her name identifies her as South Asian, there is little in her physical appearance that definitively marks her national identity. With a fair complexion, dark hair, and just the right combination of exotically “ethnic” features, she can easily (claim to) pass as a cosmopolitan Spaniard, Italian, or Moroccan. To borrow Victor Burgin’s terms, she has the appearance of a mythic exotic beauty that one might encounter on a fabled Mediterranean holiday.

The title of the show, Padma’s Passport, implies a certain transnational mobility. Watching Padma’s Passport, viewers are transported to other lands with a host who claims native knowledge of most of the cuisines featured on the show. But lodged within a classed matrix, the passport, so central to the show’s narrative, is often only an icon of easy mobility. Undocumented laborers, refugees, both political and economic, do not always have access to a passport, a legal document that grants them the right to move easily. And for those who have passports, there is also the question of having the stamp of approval and the “correct” visa, or “correct” type of visa, lodged in it. The H1-B visa that grants “temporary skilled workers” permission to work in the United States is considerably different from the H1 visa, the “standard” visa allowing non-U.S. residents and citizens to work in this country. As Amitava Kumar notes, H1-B workers are particularly susceptible to exploitative work practices because of the tenuousness of their position. Temporary skilled workers, refugees, and undocumented laborers thus may not have the requisite passport or means to imagine the pleasures of frequent border crossing.

Padma’s mobility is not limited to her ability to travel. Her screen presence also takes multiple forms; her accent and clothing shift strategically to accommodate her different screen personas. When she needs to play the alluring temptress who cooks aphrodisiacal foods, she speaks with just the trace of an accent in a husky voice; when she is playing the dutiful younger woman learning from older South Asians, as in a special episode of the Food Network special, Planet Food, on southern India, her accent becomes more “Indianized”; and when she is playing the naive “ditz” appealing to the college fraternity boy audience, she will speak in Americanized English, her voice inflecting at the end of every sentence. Without the slightest hint of unpalatable foreignness—she is conversant in (American accented) English, she knows what men want, she dresses like an “American” (read white)—Lakshmi is part of a group of emerging South Asian Americans for whom ethnicity appears to be an optional adornment.

Clothing styles also take on a very important role in constructing Padma’s flexible citizenship. When she needs to perform Indianess she is robed in a sari. When she needs to be the sexy and apparently “unethnic” host, she is attired in tight-fitting leather pants and a short electric blue T-shirt. Just as Padma ethnically adorns herself to fit the circumstances, the food that she prepares (often traditional “Western” fare) is dressed to be more “exotic” and “spicy.” Fusion in this sense entails spicing up regular American fare, fusing only the elements deemed desirable and assimilable from the “East,” leaving behind all that is deemed undesirable and unpalatable.
"Multicultural Commodified Hosts": Race, Representation, and Otherness

One may legitimately critique Padma Lakshmi for pandering to Orientalist stereotypes and self-exoticization that harken back to early images of Asian women as sexualized objects. It would be more pertinent, however, to ask what makes it possible for a show that many critics have lambasted for showcasing unoriginal dishes to emerge in the late twentieth—early twenty-first century. In the case of Ming Tsai, the critique is even more complicated because Tsai is not a culinary neophyte; he is well versed in the traditions of French, Japanese, and Chinese cooking. He has also received culinary accolades, including the James Beard Award for Best Chef of the Northeast, in 2002. In an era marked by the emergence of what Toby Miller has dubbed “multicultural commodified hosts,” one must go beyond lamenting the loss of a serious celluloid food culture and ask instead what has enabled and continues to sustain the presence of these multicultural commodified hosts.13 What are the terms on which Asian American subjects such as Padma Lakshmi and Ming Tsai are represented in the popular media? And would either Lakshmi or Tsai enjoy such levels of popularity without their youthful “exotic” good looks?

Food writer Sylvia Lovegren dubs the 1990s the “fusion” decade, but her elegy to fusion cooking in American culinary culture makes it apparent that fusion is not exclusively about bringing different types of cuisines together: “In America, we have the bounty and the culinary heritage to cook and eat virtually anything we wish. Whether we choose to nourish ourselves with a meal of frozen fish sticks and fat-free brownies, or with food—whether simple or sophisticated—that is chosen and prepared with love and respect, is up to us.”14 The language of entitlement pervasive here, the notion that “we” pick and choose what “we” want to eat also blurs the distinctions between fusion, assimilation, and appropriation.

But the concept of “appropriation” carries different valence when the chefs, or authors, are of Asian background, as with Tsai and Lakshmi who assume the posture of speaking from “within” their cultural contexts. If fusion cuisine is about combining the best of two national cuisines, on what basis does each chef claim affiliation with a particular national style? For Padma Lakshmi, lived experiences in a particular national space—Italy, India, Spain, France—appear to grant her the “legitimacy” to claim an affiliation with their national cuisines. Ming Tsai establishes his credentials by detailing in his public biography how and why he came to be interested in cuisine. He explains that having parents who owned a Chinese restaurant fed his interest in Asian cooking, “I began by ‘cooking East.’ My parents were born in Beijing, so I grew up steeped in the joys of the Chinese table. I watched my mom, dad, and grandparents cook and later joined them at the stove at home, and at the Mandarin Kitchen, a Chinese restaurant they owned in my hometown of Dayton, Ohio” (1999: x). In explaining how and why Western cuisine came to him, he makes it a point to mention that he was trained at the Cordon Bleu and pays homage to his various mentors in Paris. He also acknowledges the influence of Chinese American chef Ken Hom, a founding father of “East-West” cuisine, and notes that he spent time in Japan mastering the art of Japanese sushi rice making as well as other intricacies of Japanese cuisine.

But both Lakshmi and Tsai fuse Western cuisine with other Asian culinary styles not covered by either their life experiences or training. Tsai never explains how Indian or Vietnamese cuisine fits into his repertoire and yet he offers recipes for pho and lemon basmati rice. Similarly, Padma Lakshmi never explains how recipes for “Oriental Shrimp Salad,” “Thai Chicken Stew,” or “Pan Asian Fried Rice” enter her repertoire. While it would be problematic to suggest that Tsai has a natural connection with Chinese cuisine because he is Chinese, or that Lakshmi can unproblematically claim to understand Indian cuisine because she is Indian, it is equally troubling to see that some cuisines appear to merit extensive training before Ming Tsai can claim to be an expert while others do not. They suggest that a knowledge of the range of Asian cuisines seeps through their pores merely by virtue of being Asian. Tsai and Lakshmi claim Asian cuisines as their own, but not with a view to establishing a more inclusive vision of pan-Asian American ethnicity. Instead, Asianness, as it filters into their respective culinary styles, emerges as something that they instinctively understand because they are Asian American. How, then, do their culinary practices blur the boundaries between fusion, assimilation, and appropriation?

A more useful way to approach this question would be to ask how their cookbooks and cooking shows allow pan-Asian cooking styles to be appropriated by those of “us” who are looking to add some diversity to our palates. How does the cooking style of each chef suggest that Asianness need not be understood as an assimilable presence within the United States, but rather as something that can assimilate quietly and subtly into the U.S. culinary landscape? Indeed, how does fusion cuisine blur the
boundaries between fusion, an ostensibly democratic coming together of cuisines, on the one hand, and appropriation, actively taking from the ethnic heritages of people of color, including Asian Americans, and divesting cultural production of any racialized, or classed implications, on the other?

Assimilation, particularly the notion of assimilating quietly, cannot be divorced from the study of race and ethnicity in Asian America. The term assimilation is historically significant in terms of legislation and the juridical mechanisms regulating the racialization of Asian Americans. In the early years of the twentieth century, for instance, numerous Asian groups were excluded from American citizenship because they were deemed "unassimilable." In the context of a legal historical understanding that Asians are unassimilable because they are racially different, what does it mean to describe cuisine in laudatory terms precisely because it is so readily assimilable? Lessons from Asian American and U.S. history show us how Asian Americans negotiate this position of "otherness." Recent furor over national loyalty and security in the drama surrounding the Wen Ho Lee case, the spy plane incident in Hainan, and the current profiling of Arabs and Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and South Asian and South Asian Americans suggests that a fear of the "other" can be strategically mobilized to position Asians as the perpetual outsider in America who can pose a threat to the sanctity and safety of the American citizenry.

Yet it is true that in recent years Asian Americans have been praised (in contrast to blacks and Latinos) for having "assimilated" so well. Asian Americans are the model minority because they are hard workers, they do not make a fuss, and are not loud. It is thus significant that fusion chef Raji Jallepalli defines her cooking as a "rather quiet melding of vastly different cultures, philosophies and cooking techniques" (2000: 3), echoing the idea that Asians can assimilate subtly, but positively, into the American racial landscape. On the culinary landscape, or culinary-scape, Asian spices and food need not be considered foreign and alien because, given the "right" approach it is possible to bring "exotic" flavors from the east into familiar dishes. Similarly, Ken Hom praises Ming Tsai in the following terms; "He represents both East and West. He has adopted and blended their better aspects. As a chef and television personality, he is ideally suited to assist in the amalgamation of these different culinary traditions" (ix). Ming Tsai can be relied on to create fusion because he lives in both worlds.

In his cuisine, then, foreignness is broken down into easily digestible units that can leave one feeling satisfied for having enjoyed a culinary adventure without having had to leave home, in a figurative sense.

It becomes possible to sample a taste of the "other" without really having to confront what it is that makes Asians different; more specifically, it downplays the importance of larger historical and social issues that have brought Asians to America and also elides the fact that much of the food, if sampled in a restaurant, might be prepared by persons who are not necessarily given full access to citizenship. Focusing on how the taste of Asia can assimilate into America is thus one way to elide larger issues that might in fact suggest that working-class Asian Americans do not always enjoy the rights and privileges afforded to the younger high-income gentrified subjects that they serve, albeit invisibly.

In the name of encouraging the mainstream to cook responsibly and to respect other cultures, how do these chefs assume the posture of the native informant who will unravel the secrets of the "East" to literally render them more palatable? While it is encouraging that Lakshmi and Tsai offer strategies that allow Asian cuisine and flavor to be thought of as nonforeign, it is also important to ask about the terms on which fusion is made possible, and by extension, when fusion is rendered difficult, if not simply impossible. In many of the fusion cookbooks that have come to dominate the fusion cooking market, there are unwritten rules about what ingredients can be fused and what the end product must look like. As Ming Tsai observes, fusion cuisine is by no means a random process of combining various ingredients to create a new product. Rather, there is a highly ordered pattern as to what "counts" as authentic fusion cuisine.

One such dish is the ubiquitous crème brûlée that appears in many fusion cuisine restaurant menus and cookbooks. Tsai comments, "few eating pleasures are greater than a mouthful of this creamy custard with its crackling caramel topping. Everyone loves the combo. There are many flavored crème brûlées around—I've seen them spiked with tea, with lemongrass, with ginger, with coffee and with fruit. When it comes to this incomparable dessert, however, I'm a purist: classic is best. And this version is classic classic" (1999: 254–55). He goes on to say, "I'd be lying if I said that this is a true East-West dish: the vanilla beans from the South Pacific are as close to Asia as this dessert gets. In any case, try to get Tahitian beans—they're particularly plump and fragrant—though any fresh vanilla beans will do." Tsai suggests that his "classic classic" version is not
authentically fused but lends an "exotic" touch to his dish. It is thus subtly but significantly "exotifying" precisely because it is only fusion in a nominative sense.

Ultimately, if that end product must always be understood within the framework of crème brûlée, ragouts, cassoulets with a palatably foreign or exotic touch, as is often the case, I must question whether this is fusion, or merely an attempt to show how well Asialness assimilates to the tastes of haute cuisine. I am not troubled by hybrid cuisines, but rather by the terms of hybridization. Smoking poussin on sandalwood chips and serving it with Israeli couscous may indeed be considered an example of French passion fused with Indian flavors because it sits comfortably within the American culinary landscape, but again, it must be asked, who has the option of buying poussin and smoking it on sandalwood chips? Or for that matter, who has the ability to recognize that Ming Tsai's Tahitian Vanilla crème brûlée is "classic classic," as he puts it? Specifically, how does class intervene to enhance the cultural capital of these types of cuisine? To extend this argument further, who is able to recognize how each new dish has created a "better product," or to recognize how a "classic" French dish has been improved? The consumer is the one acquainted with such fineries of the palate and the one with the financial resources to buy sandalwood chips with which to smoke the fish.

These new(ish) cuisines are not for people on a limited budget, but for people who have the resources—both temporal and financial—to invest in such ventures. Pierre Bourdieu describes consumption as "a stage in a process of communication that is an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code" (1984: 2). Consuming fusion cuisine, then, can only have meaning for those who have the cultural know-how; if we think of fusion cuisine as a form of artistry, it "has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded . . . A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and line, without rhyme or reason" (2). The call to perform a version of Asialness that appears to be authentic and stamped with the seal of approval of the native informant is certainly present in both cases. On the one hand it is admirable that Lakshmi and Tsai have created a niche for their cooking styles and that they are not tied to an essentialist notion of what it means to be Asian in the diaspora. At the same time, what forces are at play in dismantling the borders between national cuisines?

The "arrival" of Asian fusion restaurants and the popularity of cooking shows such as East Meets West, Ming's Quest, and Padma's Passport have been read as signs that Asian Americans have "made" it. They are stories that attest to the success of Asians in America. But to read the popularity of fusion Asian cuisine as a mark of arrival is troubling because this type of fusion cuisine is self-consciously described as a "rather quiet combining of vastly different cultures" and is thus aligned with the laudatory rhetoric that praises Asians for assimilating quietly into American culture. Quietly combining suggests that the mixing of Asialness and "Americanness" is best when it is subtle, silent, and unobtrusive.

In an extended argument against calls for diversity that do not endorse an assimilationist view of ethnicity, Roger Clegg, general counsel for the anti- affirmative action group, the Center for Equal Opportunity, argues, "It's fine to eat different kinds of food and to have pride in one's ancestors. But in matters of language and our civic culture—as well as, more broadly, our manners and morality—assimilation should be the goal. An America that is multiracial and multiethnic, yes. Multicultural, no. E pluribus Unum: Out of many, one" (2000). Clegg's failure to distinguish between "multicultural" Americans rehearses an all too familiar argument about racial and ethnic difference presupposing that the only useful contribution that can be made by people of color is in the culinary world. People of color and immigrants are welcome in "America" provided they assimilate to the norms and expectations of a white, English-speaking, United States. Moreover, Clegg implicitly suggests how people of color should "enter" the American racial landscape: like good "model minorities," Asians should "enter" quietly and unobtrusively, adhering to that old ideal, E pluribus Unum: out of many one. While Tsai and Lakshmi do not necessarily create one out of many, their respective approaches to cuisine make it possible for an assimilatory version of fusion to emerge. Moreover, neither cooking show instructs viewers how to cook with culinary unmentionables such as dog, or gizzards, or culinary "oddities" such as yogurt and rice; they deal exclusively with wholesome ingredients, strictly adhering to the realm of what is considered palatable.

In promoting a vision of fusion, something is always left out of the equation. But the ingredient that is "left" out cannot merely be ignored. While further research needs to be done on what counts as fusion and what is left out, it is significant that the cookbooks with the most cultural capital in the world of fusion cuisine in the United States allow for a combination of white and Asian, but implicitly disallow fusion between other
“colors” or races. The impossibility, until very recently, of imagining black-Asian fusion cuisine in the cookbook market suggests that in many cases fusion is only acceptable when it incorporates cultural markers of whiteness. While numerous forms of Chino-Latino fusion restaurants (Chinese-Cuban, Chinese-Puerto Rican) owned by Caribbean immigrants of Chinese origin can be found in New York City, few of these are considered upscale enough to be serving “cuisine” and most do not command the high prices charged by “recognizable” fusion restaurants such as Blue Ginger in Boston, Sara’s in New Orleans, and Tabla in New York. Chino-Latino and Indo-Pak-Bangla “fusion” restaurants and eateries are generally owned and patronized by working-class immigrants who do not fit easily within the stereotype of the upwardly mobile model minority. These establishments produce cheap fast food, not cuisine per se. Certain types of fusion are considered “cuisine” while others are dismissed as mere forays into poor eclectic food. Increasingly, fusion cuisine as offered by chefs such as Ming Tsai is part of the upscale culinary market, commanding higher prices than merely “ethnic” restaurants.

Ming Tsai and Padma Lakshmi, then, are in the unique position of being the new denizens of this culinary culture. Unlike the figure of Apu on the Simpsons, Martin Yan, or Bonanza’s infamous houseboy Hop Sing, Padma Lakshmi and Ming Tsai exist within an economy of desirability. Their foods are desirable, and they are too. Although it is premature to fully assess the implications of their respective approaches to cuisine, the narrowcasting of these images propels the study of race within circuits of popular culture that demand that we develop new methodologies to think about the alignment of food, sex, race, and gender in Asian America.

NOTES

2. Ming Tsai, Blue Ginger: East Meets West, Cooking with Ming Tsai (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999), 1.
3. I am grateful to Mana Hayakawa for making this observation.
7. This is an approximation of a phrase used by Lakshmi during a show in which she struggles to blend fruit.
10. This is based on figures collated on June 7, 2002.
15. The appropriation of black urban styles, reggae and hip-hop by Asian American youth exemplifies a very different type of fusion marked by an overt attempt to address how the experiences of black Americans bear on the racial formation of Asian Americans. See, for example, Vijay Prashad’s Karma of Brown Folk (2000); Shankar and Srikanth, “Crafting Solidarities,” in A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in American (1998: 105–126); Prashad, Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity (2001); and Summer Maitra, Desis in the House: Indian American Youth in New York City (2002).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Chapter 5

"PAPPY’S HOUSE"

“Pop” Culture and the Revaluation of a Filipino American “Sixty-Cents” in Guam

Vicente M. Diaz

Preface: From a Long Line of Diazes

Hilario Diaz was an indio from Iba, Zambales. He hung with the big boys because as an herbolario, Hilario possessed folk knowledge that impressed the ilustrados, and had practical applications for the nationalist march against the imperialists. Hilario’s son, Vicente, extended the lineage as a highly decorated freemason and through advanced cartillas. And then Vicente’s eyes met those of Bibiana Valero, a fellow educator and a staunch mestiza, who mandated that Vicente first convert to Catholicism, and renounce his affiliation with the Church’s sworn enemy. From his decision, and her satisfaction, came Ramon, the first son, who received a law degree from the University of Santo Tomas and a commission in the Philippine Army just before the Japanese invasion and occupation. A survivor of Bataan (because he ate his mango beans, as our version of child psychology would have it), Ramon left the Philippines in 1949 in search not simply of the legendary American Dream but for a place to build a career interrupted and shaped by war, and also for a place to raise his young family. In Guam, Ramon discovered an island similar enough in climate and culture to the Philippines, and sufficiently far enough from a domestic situation that had, according to his wife Josefina, become too much like a battle zone. His move to America, or rather where “America’s Day Begins,” as Guam is popularly known, was a salvage operation for Ramon’s upstart family. So too was Pappy’s eventual naturalization as an American “sixty-cents,” as he punned, ambivalently, his new status as an American “citizen.”