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Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity
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When a sizeable number of Vietnamese refugees settled recently in a small Kentucky city, a rumor began circulating that people's cats and dogs were disappearing. The rumor suggested that the strange food habits of the Vietnamese were responsible for the vanishing pets. At the same time, in the Washington, D.C., area, which has approximately the third-largest settlement of Vietnamese in the United States, a large number of Vietnamese restaurants have opened and Vietnamese food is enjoying popularity in the press and at local festivals. These are examples of two very common processes involving food and groups of people. In the first a food stereotype is used as a weapon against an intruder: the formula operating appears to be "strange people equals strange food." In the second process the new group presents its food in acceptable, safe arenas where some Americans try it out and learn to like it and perhaps even learn to cook it themselves. The formula here seems to be: "not-so-strange food equals not-so-strange people," or perhaps, "strange people but they sure can cook."

The Vietnamese, as one of the most recent groups to migrate to America, illustrate other aspects of what happens to foodways in an acculturation or culture-contact situation. Traditional foods and ways of eating form a link with the past and help ease the shock of entering a new culture; thus many struggle to hold on to them despite pressures to change. Immigrants open restaurants so that it is more convenient to get certain foods that take a long time to prepare; they open stores so that ingredients are available; they grow otherwise unavailable vegetables and herbs in their backyards. One Vietnamese couple in Maryland has started a small factory to manufacture a Vietnamese style of soy sauce that currently cannot be purchased anywhere.
not point to wide regional variations in preference. Southerners, for example, like softer bread, while people in New England and the North and East Central states prefer the firmer-textured bread of all Americans. Ethnic groups try to use familiar types of bread whenever possible, despite the fact that economics and urbanization change bread-eating patterns.

The two factors that seem to operate to produce these differences in American tastes are varying food supply and varying ethnic group influences, depending on what groups settled an area of the country. Thus, regional and ethnic foodways are often intertwined. As with other aspects of ethnic tradition, there is often a drift from ethnic to regional identity: individuals without a strong sense of ethnicity may fill the need for a more specific identity than “American” with regional traditions, including cooking. Indeed, it is very difficult to deal with foodways as ethnically pure except in an idealized sense, as Don Yoder points out, “Viewed historically, each regional and national cuisine is a culinary hybrid, with an elaborate stratigraphy of diverse historical layers combined into a usable and evidently satisfying structure.” Pennsylvania German culture and food, for example, is an acculturated system with aspects from British, Scotch-Irish, and German cultures.

Factors Affecting Changes in the Foodways of an Ethnic Group

The acculturization and hybridization processes begin again when new ethnic groups or individuals arrive in the United States and experience the push-pull of cross inclinations about maintaining their traditional foodways. Some try to find and eat foods as similar to those in the old country as possible. Others give in to pressures from within and without the group to change their food habits. Both processes operate as ways of easing adjustment to life in the new country: one provides a continuation of the old lifestyle and makes the break less abrupt; the other process speeds acculturation. In his study of factors that retard or accelerate the acculturation of recent Hungarian refugees, S. A. Weinstock found those who cooked Hungarian food exclusively to be in the lowest acculturation group. Although the tendencies to maintain and to let go of traditions affect many aspects of the culture of new immigrant populations, observers have noted that foodways seem particularly resistant to change. It has been suggested that this is because the earliest-formed layers of culture, such as foodways, are the last to erode.
Several key factors are involved in affecting changes in the foodways of an ethnic group. One is generation. Generally the immigrant generation, especially those who were older when they migrated, hang on to their foodways longer than the second generation, and children are often observed to adapt first to American foodways and to introduce adults to American foods.\textsuperscript{13} Gregory Gizels qualifies this pattern by pointing out that the second-generation Greeks he studied altered foodways by simplifying food preparation, but they continued to make Greek food.\textsuperscript{14} Margaret Arnott points out that the third generation may take up the cooking and serving of ethnic foods skipped over by the second generation.\textsuperscript{15}

Frederick Fliegel finds that in addition to age, the occupation of the breadwinner, the education of the cook, and the state of the family (for example, if there are young children) all influence the kinds of foods people eat.\textsuperscript{16} Other researchers have shown how economics (whether foods are affordable), convenience (easy purchase and preparation), commercialization, and urbanization affect the retention or loss of ethnic foodways.\textsuperscript{17} Gizels suggests that changes he observed in Greek-American foodways in Philadelphia were not the result of Americanization but of urbanization. Although city life resulted in the dropping of some difficult foods and the adoption of easier preparation methods, it also included the addition of ethnic dishes to the family's repertoire because of more convenient technology and because stores made certain foods available all year which formerly had been available seasonally or only in some parts of Greece.\textsuperscript{18}

Status is another factor in changing foodways. Many individuals choose to drop ethnic foodways because they are signs of low status.\textsuperscript{19} In some cases, only certain foods are perceived to be of low status (such as the blood sausage which Illinois Germans found was offensive to their American neighbors), and these are dropped.\textsuperscript{20} Women seem particularly resistant to change in foodways and can be significant in maintaining foodways if they are in charge of the family meals.\textsuperscript{21} Among the Japanese immigrants in Hawaii, for example, the older-generation females remained at home to cook, and although there were changes in the food items, the methods of preparation remained much the same.\textsuperscript{22}

All immigrants and their succeeding generations find their traditional foodways altered to some degree. All have to make compromises which they pass on. Sometimes traditional foodways are relegated to a particular meal, usually dinner, since breakfast, snacks, and lunch seem more responsive to acculturation pressures.\textsuperscript{23} Herbert Passign and John Bennett describe our food habits as comprised of a core diet, secondary core, and peripheral foods. They found the greatest emotional resistance to changes in the core diet; hence, these foods might continue to be served with others dropping away and new ones added on.\textsuperscript{24} For example, the Japanese kept rice in their diet but added rice substitutes such as crackers.\textsuperscript{25} For most immigrants and ethnics, ethnic foods are often still served on special occasions.\textsuperscript{26}

The struggles of the immigrant generation to keep, adapt, and shed their traditional foodways affect the repertoire of foodways that succeeding generations can call upon to use in symbolic displays of ethnic identity. In many cases the struggle to keep or give up ethnic food habits continues into the succeeding generations as they struggle to adjust their sense of ethnic identity and their relationship to the larger unit of American society. One influence on that struggle, for both immigrant and ethnic, was how the rest of American society, the non-ethnic part, felt about ethnicity in general and ethnic foodways in particular. Our history includes periods of toleration for ethnics and periods of antipathy toward them. The prevailing attitude affects discussions of ethnic food habits in a given period.

Richard Cummings tells us that cooking classes were introduced in public schools in the East in the 1880s, and efforts were made to teach the poor to shop wisely and eat nutritiously. Some of these classes and efforts affected the immigrants who were beginning to pour into America, as did the struggle to regulate food processing and sales that characterized the period between 1911 and 1916.\textsuperscript{27} After World War I, social workers increased their efforts to teach nutrition to Blacks and immigrants. As Cummings puts it, "... though the negro who failed to use sufficient protective foods was coming in large numbers to the northern cities, education was facilitated by the fact that the horde of foreign-born whose dietary habits were frequently maladjusted to American life had been cut by immigration restriction."\textsuperscript{28}

Cummings wrote in 1940 but he clearly reflects, and probably even minimizes, the fear and antipathy Americans felt toward the second and third waves of immigrants, a fear that extended to their foodways.\textsuperscript{29} The period of greatest immigration was paralleled by attempts to "Americanize" the immigrants and their children in the schools, in settlement houses, and other institutions of social workers. Americanization included attempts, varying in degree of compassion, to change "maladjusted" diets. Velma Phillips and Laura Howell present the results of a survey done by students of Teachers College, Columbia University in 1917–18 of food habits of "Italians, Hebrews, and Negroes," intending to help nutrition workers, home economics teachers, and those doing school lunch programs to understand more about
the actual eating habits of some of the people they were trying to serve. Although the survey found nutrition problems such as rickets, the authors warned that the foreign women were not being reached by current methods, such as nutrition lectures. Phyllis Williams' remarkable study of South Italian folkways in the New Haven, Connecticut, area was based on eleven years of firsthand experience (approximately 1927–38) and was aimed at an audience of social workers, visiting nurses, teachers, physicians, and others who dealt with the south Italian community, and it treated Italians honestly and with respect. A chapter was devoted to their foodways in Italy and America, describing problems in nourishment and health caused by immigration to America. The Depression brought new attempts to understand the food habits of ethnic groups so that relief efforts would be as economical and efficient as possible, and nutritional education of the poorer ethnic groups continued.

As America's entry into World War II became imminent, concern with our nation's nutrition in general was renewed. There was concern about poorly nourished men who did not qualify for the armed services and about the high percentage of the population that was undernourished, affecting the nation's defense efforts. Slogans such as "Eat the Right Food, U.S. Needs US Strong" reflected these concerns. (Germany, meanwhile, was training its people to change their priorities and accept food substitutes with slogans like "Guns Instead of Butter.") With our entry into the war other problems, including rationing and food aid to the rest of the world, became significant. A group of anthropologists working through the National Research Council, the Committee on Food Habits with Margaret Mead as its head, shared results of its various research projects with seventeen government agencies concerned with national nutrition during the war. The Committee's major concerns were to define a good diet and determine how to get people to accept it. The second problem provided new impetus for studying the foodways of ethnic groups in America, because the Committee found it imperative to understand why certain groups ate what they did before efforts could be made to change food habits. The Committee produced a handbook for the study of foodways, a bulletin on the issues of changing food habits, and a number of studies of specific ethnic and regional groups, their foodways, and how these might be capitalized upon or modified to aid nutrition efforts.

Another war-related effort was the Common Council for American Unity's attempts to teach nutrition to various ethnic groups by means of food tasting and workshop programs. The Council stressed the meeting of different groups over the subject of food and the fact that ethnic Americans had much to learn from each other. These and other war-time efforts were characterized by a tone of acceptance and respect for the traditions of the different ethnic and racial groups in America; this tone is understandable since the period called for a strong sense of unity despite differences. This attitude is reflected in the following statement from Mark Graubard's work of the period: "Scientific nutrition can be a practical testing ground for tolerance. There are different roads that lead to a common goal and in the course of the common search for it, much is learned about other people and groups. Different national groups working together in a community will learn to know each other by cooperation, will learn new dishes and recipes, learn tolerance and true democratic unity."

In the 1960s Margaret Mead mentioned poorer ethnic groups as one of the undernourished groups in America, but by this time the focus of food problems had shifted in such a way that ethnic foodways no longer posed the kind of threat that they did during the heavy immigration period or the war. New problems had been added to that of undernourishment; many Americans struggled with the problems of overnourishment, for example, and all were affected by a growing list of food contaminants. Food problems were viewed in a world-wide context as well, so that Americans turned their attention to balancing the world inequity between nations with plenty and those that were starving.

Although some attempts are still being made to adapt ethnic diets to one standard, in general the period from the end of World War II to the present has been characterized by a live-and-let-eat mood. At one level Americans are said to be much alike, in food habits as well as other areas of culture, and official food is "American" food. College and high school classes, for example, focus on the foods of WASPs. Fast foods, growing food chains, the processing of foods, and the rise in eating out mean that many kinds of food are shared by Americans. Regional distinctions exist, but they too foster the sense that in certain areas of the country, at least, Americans eat the same kinds of food. In R.M. Pangborn and C.M. Bruhn's 1971 study of how three groups of Americans view the foods of other ethnic groups, some informants insisted that all Americans eat the same kinds of food. The authors suggest that one reason for such a response is "an attitude prevalent among several young people that to dwell upon the differences among the cultures of the various groups which constitute our country suggests racial bigotry or an unpatriotic viewpoint."
igious group are significant as places where differing food habits are acceptable. Festivals and other public and private celebrations are also acceptable places to display food distinctiveness. Women's magazines, particularly around holiday times, exploit the rich repertoire of ethnic and nationality foods in their glossy pages. Nationality restaurants provide another public setting in which tasting foods of others is acceptable, and food fads such as French cooking or the Chinese wok craze encourage people to incorporate the food of other nations into their own repertoires.

The new acceptance and visibility of ethnicity in the late 1960s and 1970s give some public sanction to what people have been doing all along—eating what they are comfortable eating. But encountering the foods of new groups such as the Vietnamese, or moving to a new area and finding new foods and not finding old foods, remind us that eating is a highly emotionally charged activity. We are led again to the questions of why people eat ethnic foods, and why these traditions may be maintained over many generations or given up by some immigrants and ethnics. In other words, we are led to examine the meaning of food, its symbolic nature, and the communication and performance aspects of food choices.

The Symbolic Nature of Food in Establishing Group Identity

Foodways can be charged with emotion and significance for both old and new Americans because food is potentially a symbol of ethnic identity. Recent scholarship on ethnicity has helped to refocus the conceptualization of the ethnic group from the idea of “thingness” to the idea of “process.” We are now not so much concerned with defining ethnicity as a category whose characteristics and traits we want to list, but as a social process in which the relationship of individuals and groups and the communication of identity are significant.44

Frederik Barth sees ethnic groups as a form of social organization for which the significant characteristic is self-ascriptive or ascriptive by others of membership in the group. “A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense.”45

He urges taking into account what the actors see as significant, since “some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and em-

blems of differences; others are ignored.” Barth sees the cultural content of ethnic dichotomies as being of two kinds: 1) “aert signals or signs—the diacratic features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-form, or general style of life”; and 2) “basic value orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged.”46

Barth argues that the nature of the continuity of ethnic groups depends on the maintenance of boundaries between groups. The cultural features used as signals of these boundaries may change form and content, just as the personnel of the groups can change, without damaging boundary maintenance. But in order for ethnic groups to perpetuate themselves when in contact with other groups, they not only need “signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences.” This structuring Barth calls the rules that govern inter-ethnic relations. His work helps us focus on the processes of ethnic group identification and on the communication of that identity through the manipulation of symbols in certain settings and by following rules of group interaction—in other words, through performance.47

Another anthropologist, Abner Cohen, who defines the central theoretical problem of cultural anthropology as the dialectical relations between symbolic action and power relationships, offers us further insights into the processes of ethnicity and performance.48 He defines the kinds of symbols he is discussing as: “objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action. They usually occur in stylized patterns of activities like ceremonial, ritual, gift exchange, prescribed forms of joking, taking an oath, eating and drinking together.”49

Such symbols operate to help the individual develop a sense of selfhood and to confront human problems such as life and death, and thus are both expressive and instrumental. The symbol system is flexible in that symbols can be replaced, different symbols can perform the same function, and the same symbol can change its function. What looks like continuity of symbols may upon close analysis reveal old forms being used to meet new needs.50

One of the most important functions for such symbols is the “objectification” of relationships between individuals and groups. Social relationships are developed and maintained by symbols, and thus we tend to see groups through their symbols and to identify ourselves through symbols. To Cohen, “all social behavior is couched in symbolic forms,” and “symbolic behavior is dramatic behavior.”51 Cohen
seconds Barth's injunction that we must examine the symbol system and its performance to understand the symbolic strategies of group organization. Informal groups in particular, of which ethnic groups are one type, use symbolic forms to define their identity and distinctiveness. Cohen outlines five types of symbolic forms: informal groups use: mythologies of descent, alliance under female symbolism, ritual beliefs and practices, moral exclusiveness, and style of life. These symbolic forms are not merely strategies of distinctiveness, however; they are also strategies for communication.

For example, in the ethnic group parts of traditional culture will be exploited "to articulate informal organizational functions that are used in the struggle of these groups for power within the framework of formal organization" since ethnic groups are part of a larger population competing within the framework of the nation. Cultural identity is the major symbol of the ethnic group's distinctiveness, but it also operates as a channel for communication. It helps in articulating an authority structure by mobilizing kinship, friendship and religious obligations in support of an informal authority agency. Similarly, the hierarchies within religious congregations and organs for welfare and mutual help can become vehicles for the routinization of decision-making procedures. The symbols providing these organizational mechanisms are ideologically integrated within such mores as "our customs are different," "the sacredness of our traditions," and so on. The ideology is further elaborated to cover a narrative "historical" account of the origin, the goings and comings of the group. Finally, through the continual observance of the customs and ceremonies peculiar to the group, the members are continually socialized in the culture of the group.

Cohen sees the preservation of such traditions as part of a healthy social process. They are not a matter of conservatism versus modernism, but dynamic organizational mechanisms. Studies of ethnicity such as Barth's and Cohen's urge us to examine the symbolic use of traditional culture for a greater understanding of the processes by which ethnic groups form, reform, and maintain themselves and how group and individual ethnic identity is communicated to in-group and out-group members by means of symbol and performance. Foodways are one of many aspects of ethnic traditional culture which can be studied as a communicative or semiotic system much as language is studied. The term *semiotics* refers to the study of signs and symbols including linguistic and para-linguistic communication, what Margaret Mead calls the study of "patterned communications in all modalities." 

It is within this framework that Mary Douglas tells us that "if food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. . . . Food categories therefore encode social events." This is true because of the relationship between a system such as foodways and other ordered systems associated with it in the culture. Douglas argues that a system such as food habits and taboos may operate symbolically or analogously to communicate or reflect the "boundaries between categories of people." Hortense Powdermaker suggests similar ideas about the relationship between food and group: "The communal eating of food and customs concerning it may be said to have a double social function: (1) to maintain the cohesion of the society and of groups within it; (2) to determine, in part, the relation of the individual to the society and to the smaller groups within it."

As we work towards an understanding of how foodways come actually to symbolize a group, we can begin with the idea suggested by Douglas and Powdermaker that food is related to social boundaries. We see this quite clearly when presented with the foods of strangers. Generally, we humans accept food most readily from our friends and allies and fear the food of strangers. In his discussion of prejudice, Gordon Allport points out that familiarity gives humans the sense of goodness, and strangeness evokes a sense of wrongness or evil. Habitation lessens the fear of the strange in a short time, but humans have an initial hesitant reaction to strangeness. It seems logical to us that visible differences imply real differences. Such differences as skin color, language, religious practices, and food habits give people visibility and identifiability, and hence a group may seek to hide such signs or to maintain them depending on its desire to remain visible or invisible. The Tibetans of the Kansu-Tibetan border, who connect foodways with religious affiliation, ask of strangers, "Is their mouth the same as ours or is it like the mouth of the Moslems, or do they have some other mouth?" A group's eating habits are one clue to which side of the boundary the strangers should be placed. Strange "food habits set the group apart from the community as a whole," for although we accept minor modifications of the community's eating patterns as an expression of individuality, major diversions from the norm are seen as an attack on the community and its sense of unity. The use or avoidance of certain foods becomes identified with a group and symbolic of it. Such symbolic foodways may strengthen the group's internal ties or indicate out-group status. In other words, foodways
help mark existing social boundaries and, depending upon one’s viewpoint and focus, inclusion within or exclusion from a group. Any part of the pattern of eating may operate in this manner. For example, as Mary Douglas points out: “Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance.”

The sense of inclusion is described by scholars in different ways. Kurt Lewin and Miriam Lowenberg say that food and eating create a feeling of group belongingness. Hortense Powdermaker refers to the cohesion that eating together creates for groups and family, and J.C. McKenzie uses the terms ‘community integration’ and ‘social well-being.’ Margaret Cussler and Mary de Give suggest eating together implies a kind of kinship. Whatever we call it, this sense of unity with family or other group members is so important that many cultures will suffer some hardship and discomfort to attain it. Efforts to supply Greeks during World War II with a daily hot meal failed when it was discovered that they preferred to eat their soup cold but with their families at home rather than eat it hot in an institutional setting. Similarly, many Americans expend considerable effort to share a symbolic meal with family on Thanksgiving, Easter, or Christmas. Barre Toelken describes how the celebration of Thanksgiving binds one American family to each other and to their rural past.69 The sense of unity created by sharing food is so significant and recognizable that it figures centrally in many rites of inclusion. For example, the American bride and groom symbolically feed each other pieces of the wedding cake before sharing the cake with their guests. Food can even be used to link distant family members, as when food packages are sent to children at college or to family members in the armed services. The sending of food is so common at Christmastime in the U.S. that recipes for Christmas cookies often include information on how well they travel and keep.

So strong is the unifying ability of shared food and foodways that it can operate not only between members of the group that are separated geographically but even between those separated by death. It is the practice in some countries to leave food for the dead who are thought to return on All Souls Day. Some Mexicans leave a burning candle, sweets, and toys for the soul of the dead child. Altars or ofrendas to adult departed will also be set up with candles, flowers, incense, and fruits and foods of all kinds, especially those the person was fond of during his or her life. The Vietnamese also cook favorite foods of the departed on the anniversary of their deaths and leave them on the altar to the ancestors in the home. Phyllis Williams tells us of another time that food is left for the dead. In Italy some people thought that the soul of the departed person did not vacate the home immediately and the survivors left a loaf of bread and a candle near an open door for three days after the death, when the soul was believed to settle. Some funeral practices involve providing food to sustain the dead person. Williams describes an Italian-American family filling a child’s coffin with Jordan almonds as food for the next life.

In each of these examples, food is still thought of as necessary for the dead, and the living feel a responsibility to fill that need. Thus, the dead are still included in the group. It is also a common practice in many funeral ceremonies to provide food for the bereaved family and for guests who come to the funeral or to the family’s home to express condolences. This eating ties the living together. The living eat “to keep up their strength,” perhaps as a celebration of their living status. The group plays a part in making sure the living go on supporting life. Eating at such a time is a celebration of life in the face of death.

This kind of celebration of life occurs at All Souls Day in some countries. The English eat “soul cakes”; the Italians eat a pastry called fave dei morti (beans of the dead); and the Mexicans eat panes de muertos (bread of the dead), as well as sweets in the shape of coffins, skeletons, and such during the celebration of this holiday. They are symbolically consuming death, thus celebrating the fact that they are living. But they are also symbolically expressing an acceptance of death and union with dead friends and family.

The functions of inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin: to include only certain members in a group is necessarily to exclude all others. Mark Graubard quotes a Canadian farmer who classified all food into two groups: “Fit to eat, and ‘the Injuns’ eat that.” Cultural groups and subgroups make a basic distinction between what they eat and what others eat, and the distinction may be used as a symbolic expression of the exclusion of other groups. The group may refuse to eat food associated with the other group even when it is not forbidden. These distinctions may become formalized by religion or custom.

Besides indicating inclusion or exclusion from a group, the food code can also be used to express rank or hierarchy within groups and between them. Eating together or eating similar foods in similar ways is an expression of equality, which is why integrating restaurants was so important in the early Civil Rights movement in the United States. Reserving certain special foods for a favored group as the Nazis did when they kept foods like citrus fruit out of the hands of such lower-
status groups as Poles and Jews would clearly indicate a lack of equality. Frederick Simoons suggests that reserving some foods for a favored few may be the origin of many food taboos. In any event, we do not need to look far to see that certain foods and kinds of food preparation and service are associated with different castes and classes of people, with the rich or the poor. Food differences may also express the differing rank of the sexes (with women usually ranked below men), of different ages (with children ranked below adults), and different locations (with rural foods usually, but not always, ranked below urban).

A change in eating habits could thus be used to signal a change in status, usually from a less to a more desirable group. Children adopt adult foods to signal their leaving childhood behind; people adopt the foods of sophisticated groups to appear more worldly. In the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States, the poor and working classes often imitated the food habits of the wealthy even at the expense of adequate nutrition. Non-Western people adopt Western foods and food prejudices to indicate that they are progressive and civilized, and immigrants adopt the foods of their new land to indicate a shift in status. Kurt Lewin points out that status was an important value in food selection during World War II and that Americans were coerced into eating kidneys, a nutritious but unappealing food to them, by enhancing its status with descriptions of its preparation and consumption in England, considered a high-status country by many Americans.

Foods also change status as the people and groups associated with them change. Jitsuichi Masuoka describes how Japanese immigrants in Hawaii were able to afford many of the Japanese high-status foods because of greater wealth, but as these same foods began to be associated with the old country they lost status. The money was spent instead on American foods that had become more desirable in rank.

Miriam Lowenberg and others suggest that once one has attained high status or a strong sense of identity and satisfaction with present status, one can afford to eat low-status foods.

The Communication of the Food Code in Across-Group Interactions

Another aspect of the communication of the food code is across-group interactions. At a symbolic level, eating foods across groups suggests crossing or even breaking down social boundaries. David Gottlieb reports that a study of armed service personnel aboard ship showed that they demanded foods similar to those of the countries and ports where they were taking shore leave, but did not want these foods at other times. They wanted teriyaki and sukiyaki when in Japan, but in South Carolina they requested hush puppies and black-eyed peas. Army personnel also tend to adopt the food of the land in which they are stationed.

In a wartime report on the Common Council for American Unity's plan to introduce the foods of different ethnic groups to Americans and spread the nutrition gospel, the following description is given of what happens at a food lecture tasting party:

But toward the end of the meeting there was a noticeable stir. The audience milled around a table laden with samples of food—strange food, but tempting. It was being offered as the simplest way of explaining some of the concrete contributions the foreign-born housewife can make to the solution of the problems of the general American housewife in wartime.

The exciting thing that was happening, however, was not just the food itself, but the sudden warmth of atmosphere that had been created among the most unlikely fraternalists. A Polish-American club woman and a thirteenth-generation member of American society tasted with interest a Russian dish now known as the stand-by of the Soviet Armies as well as of Russia's civilian population. An Italian-American welfare worker compared notes with the maker of a Czech lentil soup that could feed a family of six for sixteen cents. Food apparently was food and knew no political distinctions. Thus was born what was to develop into the pattern for a down-to-earth program to promote understanding among the varied peoples that compose New York City.

We can all probably think of circumstances when reaching across social boundaries was desirable and was symbolized by eating the foods of another group. Festivals that celebrate American cultural pluralism are often characterized by the availability of a variety of ethnic foods.

The opposite is also true. Richard Dorson tells of a Black informant who had tasted Mexican food and liked it but stopped eating it when friends told her that tacos were made with meat from dead cats. Clearly in her community this was a line she should not cross. Food, then, may be used to express tensions across cultural boundaries. Margaret Cussler and Mary de Give found "among White attitudes towards Negroes the prevalent belief that Negroes do not need as much to eat or to live on as the Whites, and are less discriminating in their choice of food." One of the informants claimed: "Some niggers never think about anything but corn bread half-cooked, and syrup. Up there where we used to live, the niggers eat kidneys—Daddy said
the niggers saved everything about a hog but the squeal. They eat fatback three times a day and this ole poke salat. Sometimes we cook it in a big pot and feed it to the pig. They just don't have milk and butter. Them niggers don't have stuff like that.\textsuperscript{93}

Misinformation and stereotypes about other groups' foods is one symbol of cross-group tension; real or purported lack of knowledge is another. When R. M. Pangborn and C. M. Bruhn tested three groups (adults in food services, college students, Anglo- and Mexican-American migrant workers) on their knowledge and concepts of the food habits of other ethnic groups, they found that socio-economic and cultural backgrounds influence people's knowledge of foods eaten by others. Although older, more-travelled, better-educated Americans tended to have more knowledge of food habits across cultural lines, these criteria by no means assured such knowledge and, in general, the findings showed "only casual awareness of foods eaten by people of other cultures." The food lines paralleled cultural barrier lines as revealed in the following comments of Anglo migrant workers who were questioned on their knowledge of Negro foods, to which they had been exposed while working in southern states: "Their relative unfamiliarity with Negro eating patterns probably derived from mutual distrust; when asked about Negro foods, some Anglos said, 'That's a sore subject,' or 'We don't associate with them.'\textsuperscript{94}

Using folk recipes as a way of measuring intercultural penetration in a small Kansas town with three major ethnic groups, Marjorie Sackett also found little knowledge of the groups' foodways changing hands, except in the cases of intermarriage and not always then. Her conclusion is that "each ethnic group in Concordia maintains fairly rigid lines of demarcation."\textsuperscript{95} McKenzie suggests that such lines are likely to remain rigid in the case of immigrants because people hesitate to visit or entertain immigrants since they are afraid of what will be served to eat in the immigrant's home or confused about what to serve if the immigrant visits their home.\textsuperscript{96}

Margaret Mead suggests that the fear of the strange foodways of the various ethnic groups in our plural society may explain the uniformly tasteless foods we find in American public eating places:

Culturally standardized objections to complex food dishes in which the constituents cannot be identified may also be referred to the situation in which people with very widely different food habits have found themselves in close association with each other, dependent upon alien cooking, alien serving, alien ownership and management of food distributing agencies. An investigation conducted by the Committee on Changing Food Habits into ways in which emergency feeding could make maximum allowance for cultural

differences in food habits showed that the most practical way of avoiding giving offense to anyone in a mixed group is to cook single foods with a minimum of seasoning and serve all condiments separately. Contemporary cafeteria procedures in America and the large development of self-selected types of meals are an example of a social institution which is adapted to a variety of mutually incompatible food habits. It is probable that many other characteristic American attitudes toward foods, including taboos on all subjects which may arouse disgust during eating, may be referred to the experience of different mutually unacceptable food patterns.\textsuperscript{97}

A Washington, D.C., restaurant specializing in smoked meats and fish which serves the meat plain with a choice of four sauces (Southern and Texas-style barbecue sauces of various degrees of hotness) is an example of the sort of compromise made in the public arena to which Mead refers. It may be that Roy Rogers' hamburger "fixings" bar is symbolic of our society's attempts to deal with its multi-cultural situation.

Because foodways encode so much about social events and interactions and the groups involved in them, specific foodways often come to be associated closely with the groups that practice them. To insiders and to outsiders, foodways may symbolize both a group and attitudes toward that group. Jerry Della Femina, in describing cooking in his neighborhood, gives a clear picture of how ethnic group membership is communicated by foodways:

We ate either at our house, or Cousin Ronnie's, or Uncle Dom's or wherever. My grandmother would start making her meat sauce at seven in the morning on Sunday and within five or six hours that smell would be all through the house, covering everything—clothing, furniture, appliances—and then it would go out the front door and into the streets, to mix with the aroma of neighboring meat sauces. Except that, for some reason, we didn't call them "sauces"; we called them "gravies" rather than "sauces." I could enter the neighborhood at one end and sample the air quality of the gravy, and the odds were that it would be about the same at the other end of the neighborhood, with the exception of the Sicilians, who were strange in just about every other department, too. They were much more violent than the Neapolitans and as far as their dialect went, we couldn't understand a word they were saying. They ate weird things; at least we Neapolitans thought so. They ate macaroni with pumpkin, and who the hell would do something like that?\textsuperscript{98}

Arthur Berger argues that certain kinds of drinks can be associated with cultural, national, or geographical groups. For example, Mediterraneans drink wine and coffee, and Atlantic peoples drink beer and coffee, except for the British who drink beer and tea. Coca-Cola, how-
Foodways are an especially significant symbol in the communication of statements about ethnic identity in the United States—about links with ethnicity and denial of it. We have already seen how foodways operate in general as symbols or signals of group and individual identity to in- and out-group members and how foodways are an especially potent symbol for making identity statements. Two other aspects of the foodways-ethnicity relationship make it one of the most commonly used semiotic systems for communications about ethnic identity: it is relatively safe, and it is relatively easy to use.

As in the case of the Vietnamese, ethnic food peculiarities are not always sanctioned by other groups in America, but our history is generally one of adopting and adapting ethnic foodways. The plurality of our cooking has been celebrated as itself symbolic of "Americanism." In times of security, diversity in foodways is accepted and even encouraged. Food seems of little consequence when measured against religious, political, or racial differences. In times of insecurity, of course, the power of this symbol is reflected in our hostile attitude, e.g., towards German and Japanese foods during the Second World War.

Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont point to an important aspect of America's culinary pluralism when they argue that ethnic foods did not "melt" into mainstream "American" cooking, which remains basically Anglo. Only Dutch and German cooking truly integrated with the Anglo tradition. Their comment on the rich ethnic food traditions of New York is that "each of the foreign cuisines available in New York remains isolated in its own context. They do not borrow from one another; they do not merge their separate styles into a common amalgam." Despite some examples of such mergers as in Tex-Mex and Creole cooking, this generalization applies to all American food.

The plurality of American food, then, is such that we may cook and eat a variety of ethnic foods, if we so choose, because ethnic food traditions remain strong and viable in their isolation. Their very separateness from each other and mainstream American food is one reason for their usefulness as symbols.

Many ethnic foodways are practiced in the private domain, among family members or in-group members, in the home, the neighborhood, the church hall, or at special in-group functions. This makes them safe symbols of identity for kin and group members to manipulate. Certain public arenas and times have also developed in our history as safe for the public display of ethnic foodways differences, e.g., holidays, restaurants, and festivals.

For a number of reasons, ethnic foodways are accessible to almost anyone who is interested in ethnic identity. Beliefs about food, reci-
of these types of ethnic statements may be made with varying degrees of self-consciousness. Each may be made in the private or public domain, as a communication to the self or in-group, or as a communication to the out-group.

An example of the first communicative message is revealed in the symbolic weight of foodways to immigrants in Jitsuichi Masuoka's thorough study of the changes in foodways of Japanese living in Hawaii for thirty to forty years. One change he focuses upon is the adoption of American foods and eating habits, which he sees as encouraged by the public school education of the Nisei (the first generation born in America), an education that results in the wider participation of this generation in the American way of life. In the following comments taken from a personal document and translated into English, a member of the Issei (the generation born in Japan) comments on the Americanization of the younger generation in such a way as to link American identity and American foodways:

I don't say much to my children. I know that they know and understand about America better than I. My children tell their mother what foods are good for our health. They say that we must eat more vegetables and fruits and less rice. They learn this in school—American school, I mean. I believe that their teachers are better informed along this line so I do not interfere nor ignore their suggestions. I believe firmly that the children should obey their teachers.

Judging from what my children tell me, nearly all the ideas that the Issei have are greatly different from what they learn in the school. It is impossible for us, Issei, to become Americanized and act and talk like hoaoles (white people in Hawaii are called hoaoles). We have "old heads" or set minds. Even though we know that we should be Americanized, since we intend to stay here for good, we cannot. But, we know that our children could because they know how to talk hoaole language and associate with them more freely. When we pass away, we are sure that they become Americanized.

For most Americans who have made a conscious or not-so-conscious choice to be ethnic, or adopt or accept the ethnic role as one of their identity markers, ethnic food has a second communicative message; it is a symbol that can convey their choice of an ethnic role to in- and out-group members. Ethnic foods may be cooked in the home every day or for special days such as holidays and family get-togethers. Ethnic food may be made outside the home in restaurants or businesses to earn a living; or it can be prepared in church halls and other places for special events, such as a church function or festival. Ethnic food may be eaten in public or private whether one makes it oneself or buys it. Modern technology has made it easy for people to get and

Communicative Messages of Foodways in the Performance of Identity

The performance of ethnic identity in America can be divided into three types, or three communicative messages. First, immigrants may wish to express the adoption of "Americanism" and the partial or total rejection of their ethnic immigrant identity. Second, immigrants or ethnic groups may wish to communicate maintenance or the adoption of ethnicity. Third, immigrants, ethnic groups, or non-ethnic groups may wish to communicate acceptance of the pluralistic aspect of American identity and underline intergroup harmony in the United States. Each
are expressing their cultural identity through this activity: “These foods carry cultural and ethnic associations. Likewise the work itself is an act of symbolic as well as culinary significance for the ladies. Through their labor they express and affirm the values which have shaped their lives.” The women of St. Mary’s parish, by making pierogi and babka, are communicating their own “cultural stance” and thus acting as examples, or “surrogate grandmothers” to a community of customers to whom they give not only food but a sense of their own values. “The women of St. Mary’s make available to customers, young and old, participation in an ethnic tradition through the ordinary yet unique work of cooking.”

In her discussion of Greek Americans, Janet Theophano points out that foodways create a bond among community members who are far apart. Food links people across space and time, so that it helps create a bond with past members of the group as well as between living ones. Festival and holiday foods are especially important in this way since not all members of the ethnic group will eat Greek foods every day, but most will on these special occasions.

The fasts and feasts of the church calendar mark a departure from secular time and a merger with the myths and the sacred. They are also social events which constitute and order the community. The choice of Greek cuisine and foodstuffs to mark these occasions is not without significance. At once an expression of religious piety and shared identity and community, the sumptuous and elaborate display of food in America is imbued with new meaning. That meaning involves the bond of a shared past and importantly a shared present.

Foodways help the Greek community “underline its communal and historical unity” during ritual and festive events and thus are an important symbol of that unity.

A recent national television news program describing the celebration of the fourth of July by Vietnamese refugees now living in Georgia commented that the family’s picnic was typical of the American holiday—with the exception that they were eating noodles instead of potato salad and roast chicken instead of hot dogs. The commentator reflects Americans’ attitudes toward the new refugees, a sense that in some ways they have not yet learned to be part of us. In time, the Vietnamese may learn to eat potato salad and hot dogs, but on July 4th at least. However, it is just as likely that their fellow Americans will try Vietnamese noodles and roast chicken, for the third important use of ethnic foodways is to make a statement about the acceptance and acceptability of the idea of American pluralism.
The idea that America can and does accept food from its many different groups is a common notion, reflected in the conceit that the real American “melting pot” is actually a stewpot. Articles on ethnic foods in popular magazines and eclectic cookbooks are places where this notion might typically be expressed. The following quotation from Walter Olesky’s *The Old Country Cookbook* expresses the idea in an international framework: “I like to think that there is another Common Market at work in the world, not only in Europe. It is the marketplace of the breadbasket, the dining table at which men of all national origins can sit in brotherhood and share the land’s bounty.”

Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont point out that many of our so-called ethnic foods were actually invented in America, but such foods as cioppino, chili con carne, Swiss steak, Russian dressing, chow mein, and vichyssoise give the American food vocabulary an international flavor.

Another way that food is used to underline the plurality and simultaneous unity of Americans is to point out that “American” food is ethnically derived. Thus, we are likely to run into a popular media reminder that the all-American hot dog, pizza, taco or what-have-you has ethnic origins. The very processes of Americanizing ethnic foods and ethnicizing American foods parallel what happens to the immigrant groups that come to this country. For example, Marc Tull’s discussion of Kosher brownies shows us how a popular American dessert has been incorporated into the special diet of Jewish Passover.

Americans seem to take comfort from these notions, as they do from the idea that although ethnic foods may seem strange at first, one can actually find many similarities between them and more familiar foods or among various ethnic foods. Bread is a common example selected; the staff of life may take many forms, but there is some essential “breadness” that links them all. Or the similarities between foods such as pierogi, wanton, and knodel, all dough wrapped around filling of some sort and boiled, might be pointed out. This “strange but similar” image parallels our “plural but unified” sense of American culture. The fact that the foods may not be all that different reassures us that we can remain one people despite superficial differences.

The idea that even the differences in foods are paralleled by a level of similarities is a comfort too, in that it suggests foodways as a channel for communication that is available when others may not be. Americans set aside certain times and places for tasting food across cultural boundaries and thus experiment with crossing those boundaries in a very safe manner. Restaurants and festivals offer two such arenas. Many people who attend festivals delight in experimenting with the various types of food offered and even mixing them on one plate. At one multi-ethnic festival, the Polish and Black food booths were next to each other. One Black man was heard to tell a customer he was serving to be sure and try his “Polish” hot sauce on the chili Yun. This was his way of acknowledging his Polish neighbors and expressing a sense of unity with them. Politicians who have themselves photographed at festivals and ethnic celebrations eating various foods are manipulating the clear message that eating across ethnic boundaries communicates.

Although stories of the strange food habits of the Vietnamese and other new immigrants to our country express our fears of these new strangers, our acceptance of them is also being signalled by the fact that we are learning to eat their foods in restaurants and in our homes. Americans must eat the foods of all their ethnic groups, Americanizing them in some ways, because by this act we perform the sense of our national ethnic identity. By ingesting the foods of each new group, we symbolize the acceptance of each group and its culture.

**NOTES**

10. S.A. Weinstock, “Some Factors that Retard or Accelerate the Rate of Acculturation with Specific Reference to Hungarian Immigrants,” *Human Relations* 17 (1964):335.


15. Arnott, 144.


17. Arnott, 147; Humphrey, 256; McKenzie, 200; Passin and Bennett, 122.


19. Simoons, 121.

20. Passin and Bennett, 122.


22. Masuoka, 764. Also see Larry Danielson, “Swedish-American Mothers: Conservators of the Tradition” (paper delivered at the 1977 American Folklife Society Annual Meeting), and Dorothy Lee, “Folklore of the Greeks in America,” Folk-Lore 47 (1936): 294-310, for examples of women as conservators of traditional culture.

23. Masuoka, 763-64; McKenzie, 200.

24. Passin and Bennett, 113.

25. Masuoka, 763.


27. Cummings, 81-82, 91-110.

28. Ibid., 196.


38. Graubard, 194.


40. For attempts at a single standard, see discussion in this book’s essay by Judy Perkin and Stephanie F. McCann, “Food for Ethnic Americans: Is the Government Trying to Turn the Melting Pot into a One-Dish Dinner?”


42. Pangborn and Bruhn, 105.

43. Yoder, “Food Cookey,” 335-356. Note the distinction between nationality foods— foods of other countries—and ethnic foods— foods related in some way to one’s family’s ethnic identity.


46. Ibid., 14.

47. Ibid., 15.


49. Ibid., preface.

50. Ibid., preface, 29, 39.

51. Ibid., 30-34, 92.

52. Ibid., 69-75.

53. Ibid., 91-92.

54. Ibid., 98.

55. Ibid., 15.


58. Douglas, Deciphering a Meal, 80, 68.

68. Simoons, 41.
69. McKinzie, 201.
72. Powdermaker, 246-47; McKinzie, 209.
73. Margaret Cussler and Mary L. de Give, Twist the Cap and the Lip: Psychological and Socio-cultural Factors Affecting Food Habits (New York: Cap, 1952), 39.
76. Lowenberg et al., 135.
79. Williams, 201-209.
80. Spicer, 99-107. For a discussion of "Sin-eating" and related practices which offer other examples of how, through food, a relationship between the living and dead members of the group is expressed see Sidney E. Hartland, Sin-Eating, in The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 9 (1908-1927 ed.), 272-76.
81. Graubard, 5.
82. Simoons, 41.
83. Lowenberg et al., 146.
84. Graubard, 15, 179, 191.
86. Lowenberg et al., 52, 974; Graubard, 11-12; Cussler and de Give, 63, 65.
87. Douglas, Parvy and Danger, 151-52; Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," for fuller discussion of the social strata of various communities, see Bennett, Passin and Bennett, and Cussler and de Give.
88. Powdermaker, 247; Cussler and de Give, 37; Simoons, 110; Cora DuBois, "Attitudes toward Food and Hunger in Alor," Languages, Culture and Personality, ed. Leslie Spier et al. (Menasha, Wis.: Sapir Memorial Publication Fund, 1941), 277; Moore, 82.
89. Lowenberg et al., 118.
91. Lowenberg et al., 144.
94. Cussler and de Give, 71.
95. Pangborn and Brun, 108.
97. McKeen, 202-203.
101. Simoons, 41.
102. Graubard, 142.
103. Molly Geiger Schuchat, Hungarian Refugees in America and Their Counterparts in Hungary: The Interactions between Cosmopolitanism and Ethnicity (Ph.D. diss., Catholic Univ. of America, 1971), 90.
104. Lowenberg et al., 146-47.
106. Root and de Rochement, 276-312.
107. See Ginzburg on the adaptation of Greek foodways in America.
108. Schuchat, 102.
109. Ibid., 147; see also 123-24, 146.
110. Masuoka, 765.
113. Ibid., 29.
115. Root and de Rochement, 276-78.
116. Ibid., 306.