We Are
What We Eat
Ethnic Food and the
Making of Americans

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The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the revision of U.S. immigration laws in 1965 opened a new era in ethnic relations in the United States—and a new round of ethnic exchanges in America's food markets. The newest groups of immigrants come from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean; they enter a United States now firmly dedicated to racial equality and cultural diversity, at least in the legal arena. In both these ways, the exchanges of the present differ from those of the past.

But in most other respects, the cultural and commercial dynamics of American eating remain surprisingly familiar. Like earlier immigrants, today's immigrants bring with them distinctive eating habits, unfamiliar to older Americans; these distinctive tastes continue to create enclave markets for immigrant entrepreneurs. Today, too, ethnic businessmen still create important economic niches for themselves as producers and retailers of food. The result? More diversity, new creoles, and American foodways again in rapid transformation.

As in the past, ambitious immigrant entrepreneurs often succeed by reaching out to multi-ethnic consumers with cross-over foods of appealing novelty. The taco is arguably the latest ethnic icon en route to status as an American food—sold and eaten everywhere by and to people of all ages and backgrounds. Yet only forty years ago, the owner of a Mexican restaurant in Minnesota had to teach public school classes on Mexican food in order to build a clientele for her tacos. Will satay or jerked chicken be next? It seems possible. The cartoonist Jim Unger in 1988 was already poking fun at midwesterners who would not try Indian curries because they were foreign and "unpatriotic," even though they ate "spaghetti mostly."

Today's ethnic businessmen nevertheless buy and sell in a world somewhat different from the past. Immigrants now cook and eat in a culture less interested in demonizing them than in enjoying their foods; it is hard to find, or even imagine, a modern-day counterpart of the home visitor who judged the degree of an immigrant's acculturation by the smells wafting from her kitchen. Even if consumers continue to choose selectively—snAPPING up tacos while disdaining menudo—ordinary Americans today are much more eager than in 1900 to entertain themselves with the culinary gifts of new immigrants. They also continue to explore and to modify the cuisines of older ethnic groups. And, for their part, today's immigrants are quickly discovering the microwave, take-out pizza, and Coca-Cola—if they did not already know them as American products in their homelands.

Businessmen within ethnic enclaves and at the largest American corporations eagerly gauge the emergence of new ethnic market niches whose food dollars they pursue. Food fights and ethnic revivals—should they come—seem decades away. For now, Americans of many backgrounds seem content to continue looking into one another's pots—as they have for the past four hundred years.

As in the past, too, culinary exchanges vary considerably from region to region, thus shaping the evolution of regional American eating habits into the next century. Rural areas and the Midwest attract relatively few newcomers, while the Sunbelt South faces for the first time the challenge of incorporating new immigrants. Culinary change is greatest in American cities, and especially those most affected by the new immigration. Miami, Los Angeles, and New York vie for the label of the city most transformed, but even Minneapolis has its new population of Hmong, and Charleston has its Central American construction workers and gardeners. As in the past, the mix of immigrants varies east, south, and west. West Coast cities house Mexicans, Central Americans, and new immigrants from across the Pacific—Chinese, Samoans, Filipinos. Miami has mixed Cubans, Central Americans, and Haitians. In New York, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans
have crowded into old Jewish and Irish neighborhoods, while new arrivals from China have engulfed its Little Italy. Indians, Colombians, Russians, Haitians, and Jamaicans have completely revitalized older decaying neighborhoods, particularly in Queens and Brooklyn. In the New York suburbs, enclaves of Japanese and Korean businessmen have reminded New Yorkers that this was not just a migration of the "huddled masses." The inevitable food exchanges among these groups guarantee that American eating on the East Coast will continue to differ from that on the West Coast and in south Florida well into the future.

New York's new immigrant enclaves require many of the same services as immigrant enclaves in the nineteenth century, including imports from their homelands. West Indians, for example, demand freshness in the tropical fruits and vegetables they eat. As a result, the importation of tropical products by air from Jamaica has increased in recent years; 4 million pounds now go to New York and 14 million pounds to Miami. Still, small shops like Maria's West Indian Market in Brooklyn must struggle to deliver produce of the quality her customers seek. Another West Indian grocer explains, "Jamaicans like [breadfruit] when it is not fully ripe and brown. Even if picked green, it ripens rapidly and must be kept submerged in water or wrapped in plastic, or it will spoil immediately. Even so, it ripens so fast that much of it is unacceptable to Jamaicans in New York." Its price is also high. Will Florida-grown breadfruits follow? Undoubtedly.

In Maryland, a Vietnamese immigrant has begun manufacturing soy sauce to draw immigrants away from imported brands. As ambitious as earlier entrepreneurs, he told a reporter, "My dream is to become the Colonel Sanders of soy sauce."

Immigration from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Midwest has raised demand for goat meat, and rural entrepreneurs have responded in predictable ways. In Bladenboro, North Carolina—a rural area almost completely untouched by international migration—Ahsan Mohyuddin's Halal Meat and Food Corporation specializes in slaughtering goat according to Islamic law. His market remains largely among the foreign born, and quite distant; so it seems unlikely that he and other goat processors will anytime soon challenge the hegemony of pork, particularly barbecued pork, in this part of the country. As in the past, the eaters of the rural South (and to a lesser extent Southwest) remain more tied to the creoles of the Columbian exchanges than much of the rest of the nation.

Similarly, it seems unlikely that long-time Americans will be drawn to the new markets for live poultry that again dot New York's poorer neighborhoods. "We're used to live ones," a woman from Ghana explained as she bought from a Bronx storefront replete with squawking birds and men in butchers' smocks. Once popular among New York's Jewish and Italian consumers, fresh poultry markets in New York saw their numbers plummet from about 200 in the 1930s to fewer than 20 in the 1970s. But numbers climbed again with new immigration. According to a reporter accustomed to supermarket shopping, these markets "resemble a cross between pet shops and automobile garages, with hundreds of birds stacked in cages in cavernous, unadorned rooms."

Small groceries catering to immigrant consumers in New York, like their earlier counterparts, quickly become important community centers. They also compete rather successfully with the city's chain supermarkets. Bodegas began appearing with Puerto Rican settlers in the 1930s; Cubans operated large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, while the huge migration from the Dominican Republic make this group the most important among 8,000 New York bodega-keepers today. When they first opened their businesses, Dominican grocers became "like part of the extended family, when everybody knew each other and credit was honored," according to one customer. Or, in the words of Michale Concepcion, "A bodeguero has to treat people with love." They market the soft drinks, white cheese, plantains, pigeon peas, rice, beans, olive oil, goat, pigs' heads, and bollito that customers demand. Easy credit disappeared, however, as these small businessmen expanded, adding frozen food compartments and regular American produce. Like grocers of the past, Dominican grocers also cooperated, forming organizations like the Metro Spanish Food Wholesalers (founded in the Bronx in 1967) to purchase products in bulk. With such support, small businessmen remain optimistic that they will continue to compete with the larger chains; it has been estimated that New York's Hispanic families spend 55 percent of their food dollars in bodegas. The fact that
chain supermarkets hesitate to compete for low-income consumers, who generate very slim profit margins, contributes as well to the strength of the bodega in immigrant enclaves.

Even when firmly part of an enclave economy, New York’s immigrant food entrepreneurs are nevertheless also busy adapting the foods of their homelands in response to local market availability and to the changing tastes and composition of their consumers. An Egyptian restaurateur confessed that while his mother “made melokhia from the fresh leaves of the actual melokhia plant that grew in her backyard in Cairo,” he instead uses a prewashed, precut, frozen variety imported from Egypt. He buys the ingredient in Middle Eastern grocery stores. The same man confesses that he no longer forms falafel balls by hand, since consumers will accept mechanically produced ones.9

But he does eat hamburgers, and enjoys them. Immigrants’ adaptation to American dishes often began before they left home, so ubiquitous have corporate purveyors of American fast food become around the world. Recently arrived foreign students, for example, reported little difficulty in eating the new foods they encountered in the United States in the 1970s, even though three-quarters of them also missed homeland foods. Most Asians in this group ate western-style breakfasts and snacks, but large numbers, regardless of background or previous cooking experience, chose to prepare an evening meal in order to produce approximations of what they might have eaten at home.10 Many Cambodian families, too, adopt American food for breakfast and lunch, while eating Cambodian-style foods from a plastic tablecloth arranged on the floor in the evening; the children accompany their meal, however, with Sprite and precede their meal with a sweet cereal—Kix. West Indian families in New York today mix black-African traditions with those of the Caribbean for Thanksgiving, serving mashed turnips, turkey with bread dressing, cranberry sauce, and apple pie, alongside plantains, saltfish, and red snapper.11 In modern-day San Antonio, “tamales meet the turkey”—in a turkey stuffed with tamale dressing. All these forms of adaptation occurred in immigrant homes in earlier generations, too.

Cross-over eating regularly occurs among recently arrived immigrants. In the Queens neighborhood of Elmhurst, residents openly talk of their community as a melting pot or mixing bowl. There Louie Antonio (a Greek) operates Singha’s Famous Pizza restaurant; most of his customers are immigrants recently arrived from India. A New York Times visitor to his multi-ethnic neighborhood repeats the slogans of the American Folklore Festival, insisting that food shopping is “a means to learn English, a way to feel at home, a chance to experiment, to bridge between vastly different cultures.” The owner of the nearby El Molino Panaderia Argentina Confrería (which sells Argentine breakfast pastries, characteristic flat sandwiches, and caramel-filled pastries) is a Korean, Sung Hong. But most daily customers at El Molino stop in to buy a croissant or bagel before work. “I don’t know why,” Paul Hong told a reporter, “but my father learned everything he knows at a Jewish bakery.”12 In familiar fashion, today’s cross-overs resemble those of the past in including food, businessmen, and consumers of many backgrounds.

Somewhere in this Queens neighborhood, or ones like it, the twenty-first century equivalents of New York deli—the new foods that will symbolize the city or region—are probably now being bought and sold. In the South, observers have already identified Miami’s Cuban sandwich as a ready symbol of South Florida’s regional cuisine.13 Calling their cuisine Nuevo Cubano or New World cooking, Cuban chefs take tropical ingredients and the ethnic foods of earlier immigrant generations—noteably pizza and pasta—and use American cooking techniques, especially grilling and smoking, to create Florida dishes like blackened red snapper with orange sauce and key lime pasta. Says restaurateur Efrain Veiga, “All these ingredients were here just waiting to be used in different ways.”14 The participants of the Columbian exchanges could not have said it better four hundred years ago.

As innovative as their earlier counterparts, immigrant inventors of cross-over foods continue to compete quite successfully with fast food franchises in multi-ethnic cities. As business analysts have noted, “The gleaming McDonald’s assembly line is not substantially more productive than the traditional diner,” and, in any case, it is not in production efficiencies that McDonald’s realizes its profits.15 In New York, Chinese restaurants in particular continue to attract attention for their equally assembly-line production. One New York Times writer labeled an 8000-square-foot commercial kitchen that produced 100 varieties of dim sum an “infernal machine.”16
Low prices remain the key to success in immigrant businesses. So does family labor. Family restaurants in Dominican or Chinese neighborhoods of New York are well known for their low wages, poor benefits, and limited job security, at least for workers who are not relatives. But the same is true in fast-food franchises, which have the highest rates of labor turnover of any American employers. While the discrepancy between executive earnings and those of female, minority, and teenage workers is enormous in companies like McDonald's, this is scarcely a source of conflict in family-run businesses. And unlike the waiters and kitchen help in Chinese and Greek restaurants, few McDonald's workers expect to open their own restaurant someday with expertise learned on the job.

Nationally, consumers of inexpensive meals spend $29 billion in small mom-and-pop restaurants and $23 billion in fast food chains. One study of new immigrants in New York concluded that New Yorkers patronize national fast food chains less often than other urban dwellers precisely because family-based, small-scale ethnic restaurants provide tastier, more varied fast food, at prices only slightly higher than big corporations. According to Elizabeth Bogen, "New Yorkers seem willing to pay for their tastes," and "it is hard for a national chain to meet the widely diverse food tastes of New York's ethnically mixed population. Those tastes are more easily served by small, locally owned specialty shops."

Managers of the warehouses that service national grocery chains also admit they are hard pressed to stock the range of products on their shelves that New Yorkers demand. Their difficulties leave open a market niche for smaller, more specialized, often immigrant competitors. Nor is this phenomenon completely new. During the frenzy of chain-grocery-store expansion in the 1930s, 28 percent of grocery retailers still operated out of their living quarters and had no employees except family members. A study at that time concluded that these stores "lead all known retail organizations in economy of operation." Members of enclaves still seem to understand and to target the tastes of multi-ethnic urban markets more effectively than corporate readers of American Demographics. The long hours worked by "Mom and Pop" keep their groceries as competitive as their restaurants.

American tastes also remain firmly regional, even after one hundred years of cross-country transportation and trade. Americans in the Northeast consume five times more pasta than those in the Southwest. Fried fish is a popular fast food in the Southeast and Northwest but not in the South Central or Rocky Mountain states. Fried chicken still enjoys its strongest regional market in the South, though its ethnic market is probably strongest among black Americans throughout the nation.

Corporations geared to mass production for a national market must take these regional differences into account if they are to succeed. In the 1970s market research showed, for example, that, nationwide, 40 percent of Americans like a thin-crust pizza, 40 percent like a thick-crust pizza, and 20 percent recognize no difference. The Northeast was thin-crust pizza territory, but within 100 miles of Long Island, along the New York/Connecticut border, Pizza Hut had to develop three different varieties of pizza crust and sauce to compete successfully with smaller pizzerias. And in Cincinnati, McDonald's reluctantly concluded it had to introduce a fish sandwich or lose all its numerous Catholic consumers on Friday to Big Boy's. Chesapeake-Pond discovered that southerners wanted a "thick and hearty variety" of their Ragu sauce (purchased for $43.8 million in 1969 from its developers Giovanni and Assunta Cantisano of Rochester), while Californians preferred the much lighter Ragu Fino Italian.

Today as in the past, the street vendor still seems closer to cross-over consumers' complex and regional taste buds than corporate America, and this petty entrepreneur often continues to introduce novelties and low-cost culinary adventures. Most of New York's 7,754 licensed food vendors are recently arrived immigrants. They sell the snacks of Mexico and dozens of other countries alongside long-time "American" specialties: pretzels, crab rolls, Philippine lumpia, pickles, knishes, empanadas, calzones, gyroes. A fairly typical vendor is Tony Stanacich, who despite his South Slav name, is an Argentinean dishing up burritos, tacos, and "Acapulco salad"—all Mexican-inspired dishes—to those in search of a fast lunch near Wall Street. "Beethoven played the piano, but the piano maker was Italian," Stanacich concluded, trying to explain the multi-ethnic blend he represents. Competitors to Stanacich's Latin foods include West Indian roti, served up by the Badall family (who came to Brooklyn from Trinidad), and pizza from Hispanic vendors working for a small chain of street pizza carts owned by Michael Paparo, an Italian-American.

"Fast food makes good business," said Afghani Mohammad K. Rouzi about the food he serves from a pushcart, and later in the day from his own
While market exchanges are slowly pushing urban eating in New York, San Antonio, and Los Angeles toward new creoles, national attention continues to focus instead on consumers' interest in foods and drinks still firmly labeled as ethnic. Cross-overs eating became so popular among Americans in the 1970s and 1980s that food writers, cultural critics, and business analysts alike talked about a nationwide craze for ethnic foods. They identified the fad with young, well-educated consumers—baby-boomers all—who fall roughly into two groups: the hippies and political activists of the 1960s-1970s generation, and the young urban professionals (yuppies) of the 1980s, who included both recent law school graduates and ex-hippies and activists moving toward comfortable, middle-class, middle-aged lives. Probably the most surprising cross-over enthusiasm among hippies and yuppies was not a dish introduced by a new immigrant group but a drink: wine. Inexplicably and rather suddenly, hippies in the 1970s and yuppies in the 1980s made wine a totally acceptable and even stylish American beverage, as popular with middle-class Americans as lager beer had been one hundred years earlier.

The change was a long time coming from the days when robber barons and the urban elite preferred French imports and when only immigrants and bohemians drank domestic “dago red.” Key players were the largely Italian, Italian-American, and German vintners of California, who survived Prohibition by producing grape juice, sacramental wines, table grapes, and “wine bricks” (for home wine manufacture) and held tenaciously to dreams of expanding markets. Their sons surveyed the wreckage of Prohibition, tested the marketplace, and in the late 1930s began to modernize. Seventeen of the 32 men listed as “wine pioneers” of the modern California wine industry had technical or scientific training, many at the University of California at Davis or Berkeley. Others proved adept at reorganizing family businesses to produce a safe and standard product for national distribution.

Men like California’s Mondavi, Gallo, Rossi, Petri, Mirassou, Martini, Zanzott, Fromm, and Cella had fathers, or even longer family traditions, in winemaking. Family ties continued to be important in the post-Prohibition world, but they assumed new forms. Often brothers or brothers-in-law shared management of family businesses—as did Peter and Robert Mondavi, Ernesto and Julio Gallo, Otto Meyer and Alfred Fromm, and Norbert and Edmund Mirassou. In each family, one man, the technician, specialized in winemaking, while the other pursued new marketing strategies or oversaw the reorganization of the business as a shareholder-owned corporation. In most cases the winemaking brother stayed with his machines and in the fields because he strongly disliked corporate life. Elia C. Skofo summed up this feeling: “I was a winemaker; I wasn’t going to become an officeman, even though I realized there was a lot of good things about it.”

Sometimes disagreements rooted in the differing concerns of technically educated winemakers and their market-oriented brothers threatened to destroy family businesses. For example, all the children of Cesare Mondavi worked at some point in their family business, began in 1923. In 1943 the Mondavis bought the Krug winery, and two sons, Robert and Peter, transformed the business into one of California’s leading producers of wines. When father Cesare died, mother Rosa, now president of the company, invited a widowed brother to come and live with her and manage the company. Rosa Mondavi remained a businesswoman on traditional models. She oversaw the business from her kitchen, and cooked meals for board members and business clients. Her sons developed diverging opinions typical in winemaking and marketing sibling teams. Quarrels between Peter and Robert over corporate strategy resulted in divisive law suits, which were ongoing when Rosa died in 1976. Similar family feuds shook other producers of bulk wines, notably the Gallo brothers. Fre-
better educated and younger, with a higher income, than moderate users of beer, who are less secure financially and more involved with popular culture. For hippies and yuppies—two comparatively affluent market segments—wine drinking went hand-in-hand with ethnic eating, and together they symbolized both a hedonist and nutritional critique of American eating habits. These same consumers also sought ethnic foods quite different from the humble, down-home foods that pleased new ethnics in the 1970s.

Hippies, as well as the yuppies and New Agers who followed and were influenced by them, viewed peasant cuisines from around the world as healthful and earth-friendly, unlike the preservative-laden, resource-gobbling, wastefully-packaged, homogeneous processed foods churned out by impersonal and perhaps immoral giant food corporations. Some hippies and their followers saw ethnic cooking as “a protest against American cultural imperialism around the globe,” or a critique of capitalism. They objected to what they saw as the international corporations’ exploitation of labor, their expropriation of other countries’ resources, and their negative impact on the rainforest and other environments.

A boom in counter-cultural consumer cooperatives—sometimes built on their ethnic, left-wing predecessors, especially in the upper Midwest—occurred during the 1970s, and remnants of that movement can still be found in most large cities today. Hippies’ concern with how food was produced opened new opportunities for communal forms of production. Thus, the Santa Ana Indians and the nearby villages that formed the Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos incorporated to grow blue corn, a discovery of New Age eaters in the 1980s. With revenues of $40,000 and profits of $7,000, they hoped to triple their business under the leadership of Denis Robinson.

Robinson noted that the tribes “would like to become contract growers for a major processor or even make their own consumer products,” although they still sold much of their corn through Indian fairs and advertisements in organic-gardening magazines. This change would require them to begin using contemporary farm machinery, Robinson admitted, and this would hasten their evolution toward corporate styles of business.

Ethnic foods underwent yet another round of transformation to meet the health standards of the most nutritionally minded of young American consumers in first regional, then national, markets. In Michigan’s Upper
Peninsula, health food stores and some pasty shops began to prepare vegetarian pasties and pasties with whole wheat crusts. As Warren Belasco has noted, anticompetitive types of the 1970s successfully nudged American corporations to deliver the kinds of ethnic foods they wanted. Nearly half of Conagra's Healthy Choice frozen entrees now have ethnic flavorings; Campbell Soup's health-conscious "le Menu" brand includes Hispanic and Asian flavors. A 1994 controversy sparked articles with titles like "At Mexican Restaurants, Hold the Fat, Not the Taste" and "A Who's Who in Health Mex." Corporations responded with "lite" ethnic foods that one southwesterner labeled "fern mex." Even the Mexican-American-owned El Chico restaurants stopped using lard for masa dough and tamales because of consumer resistance to animal fat.

For some counter-cultural Americans, seeking a healthier way to eat returned them to their own ethnic traditions. Vegetarian and healthful versions of ethnic foods developed alongside the traditional ethnic fare offered at food festivals and featured in community cookbooks in the 1970s. For American Jews, a vegetarian tradition had been articulated a century before in the 1880s and 1890s. The deeply rooted habits of kashrut, which separated meat and milk, in poorer communities generally had required limited consumption of meat.

The Jewish Vegetarians of North America distributed a newsletter to hundreds of members in the 1980s, and the well-known Jewish vegetarian Jonathan Wolf, an Orthodox Jew, began teaching courses on "Judaism and Vegetarians" and celebrating the sabbath and other Jewish holidays with vegetarian meals. Vegetarian Jews on Passover could even turn to a "Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb" that reminded them that "vegetarianism is a break with tradition rather than a return to an historical trend." Maureen Goldsmith, who called herself a "twenty-five-year-old hippie-type young woman of Jewish ancestry (healthy Russian stock)," not only became a vegetarian but emphasized natural foods in her cookbook *The Organic Yenta.* She reported to those wishing to follow her recipes that "along with my change to natural foods has come a rebirth in my interest in Jewish cooking...I began to go back over my life to remember milk&meals we used to have when I was a little girl."

Educated, well-traveled, and enjoying a higher income than most hippies had as young people in the early 1970s, yuppies in the 1980s searched more often for authentic and exotic, than healthy, ethnic food. Chef Boyardee spaghetti and Pizza Hut pizza were not what these savvy consumers had eaten in the quaint trattorie of Italy. Neither was the food offered at ethnic festivals and in many community cookbooks: Chow mein and spaghetti and meatballs failed the test of authenticity on yuppie palates. As critics noted, "They preferred to eat the latest from abroad rather than the culinary left-overs of immigrant cultures." Their search for foreign, haute, or at least nouvelle cuisine created new opportunities for foreign-born and trained immigrant chefs. Typical were very young men, like Pascal Derringer from Alsace, who at age 25 had already worked twelve years in great restaurants in France when he took a job at New York's Gauloise. "A chef has to know everything," he lectured, while one of his young, slightly more experienced colleagues at Palace concurred. "You have to get your base first before you can paint like Picasso." One hundred years ago, young chefs like this would have worked at Delmonico's and served robber barons, who were the big spenders of their era.

When yuppies ordered dinner, however, their motives seemed as much like those of bohemians as of robber barons. For yuppies, like bohemians, a food columnist noted, "Eating is a form of travel, and no matter how high the price of cardamom, taste-bud tourism is a real bargain." In Atlanta, the Imperial Fiez Moroccan restaurant trumpeted its own exoticism: "Imperial Fiez is a place for people of nostalgic and romantic dreams." Their advertising blurb cited a review that urged people to "take a mini-vacation to Morocco" and to "leave your shoes and inhibitions behind." Business analysts accustomed to thinking of the marketplace in demographic terms, at least since the 1960s, began to call the yuppie segment an example of "psychographics, not demographics." Market analyst Harry Balzer reported to his colleagues that "the only growth area in dining out is in the Asian and Mexican sector," because these cuisines meet baby boomers' "appetite for exoticism" and perhaps allow them to reive — on a more lavish scale and at a higher price — their experience as $5-a-day backpackers, sampling the native cuisines of the world.

Even well-educated professionals needed guidance in exploring new cuisines and other developments in the restaurant industry. Help came from
many directions. In the 1990s the Naples Pizza Association and Milan's Associazione Pizzaioli Europei e Sostenitori visited the United States and agreed that American pizzas failed to meet their ten rules, which included a list of classic pizza ingredients. These rules gave thumbs-down to Sicilian- or Chicago-style deep-dish pizzas as well as to the focaccia and other flat breads of central and northern Italy. Still they noted, "Variations on the classics, which are inspired by tradition and fantasy, are accepted, provided they are not in conflict with the rules of good taste and culinary laws." Presumably pizza with shiitake mushrooms and Canadian bacon failed this test.\textsuperscript{41}

Adventurous eaters in search of authenticity turned as well to academics and to native-born interpreters of foreign cuisines, like Diana Kennedy. After writing an authoritative study of Mexico's regional cuisines, Kennedy surveyed New York's Mexican restaurants, and found almost all lacking. They were, she warned readers, "more Mexican-inspired than authentically Mexican." After recommending three city restaurants to truly discriminating diners, Kennedy dismissed the rest for their "odd, eclectic and ineffective" food, and rejected Mexican pizza, fruit-flavored margaritas, and Monteau croissants as examples of culinary experimentation gone awry. One Mexican restaurateur she interviewed, however, humbly reminded Kennedy of the market pressures he faced. Apologizing for tortilla chips on the table, he explained, "I have to do it that way. Our customers expect it."\textsuperscript{42}

What Kennedy disdained, other upscale New York consumers demanded. Much of it was "fusion food"—the nouvelle, and often pricey and faddish, creoles of the 1980s, often associated with California chefs. Yuppies could explore Alice Water's or Wolfgang Puck's California fusions of Asian, Mediterranean, and regional American cuisines, all made with the finest organically grown California ingredients. They could sample the Asian/Italian blends of "Ciao Mein" at the Hyatt Regency at Waikiki. They could exalt in San Francisco chefs' explorations of Pacific Rim culture as a unique fusion cuisine, where sweet and salty marinades of Asia become attached to American grill and barbecue traditions, and where the hot and spicy foods of Asia meet the hot and spicy foods of Mexico and the American Southwest.

The yuppies' fascination with ethnicity in authentic or nouvelle forms eventually spread to more modest consumers in the mass marketplace. Ethnic and foreign foods invaded the middle-management coffee room of the comic-strip character Cathy, who "naked" Thai food one day to cover up the smell of huevos rancheros prepared earlier by a colleague. Cathy complained that the day before, "Eveline had the burrito. I know because I had to disinfect the microwave before I made my pasta primavera." "Which, thank you very much, made my stuffed flounder taste like broccoli" complained a third office mate. Cathy's boss, Mr. Pinkley, upset by the pretensions of his office staff, yelled, "What's wrong with you people!! Whatever happened to bringing a sandwich?" But Cathy soothed him with the voice of a midmarket yuppie wannabe: "There, there Mr. Pinkley, let me fix you a nice steamy bowl of chili."

Consumers like Cathy never traveled the world on $5 a day or shopped barefoot in '70s hippie food cooperatives; neither did they have the disposable income of yuppie consumers. For her, too, eating for adventure might require guidance, and one introduction to moderate-priced ethnic dinners promised "fearless diners in ethnic restaurants," which might otherwise be intimidating.\textsuperscript{43} It is easy to imagine Cathy and her office co-workers enjoying an occasional lunch out at Benihana of Tokyo, with its knife-swinging teppanyaki chefs. Here was a modern reminder of novelty's appeal in ethnic disguise. Benihana was founded by Hiroaki (Rocky) Aoki, who came to the United States in 1959 as a college student and "discovered...that Americans enjoy eating in exotic surroundings but are deeply mistrustful of exotic foods." Modifying Japanese hibachi cooking (learned from his father, an owner of a chain of restaurants in Japan), Aoki promised "noicky, sticky, slimy stuff" and offered three "Middle American treats—steak, chicken, shrimp." Japanese touches were architectural (his restaurants are built of old disassembled Japanese houses) and theatrical. His chefs were trained in Japan and learned to portray what Benihana advertising called "A man dressed like a chef but with the unmistakable air of a samurai warrior."\textsuperscript{44}

Because it now appealed to almost all Americans, from the richest to the poor, ethnic food was a large segment of the food industry, which—with sales of $70 billion already in the 1970s—had become the third largest of American industries. Americans left $53 billion a year on the counters of inexpensive restaurants—$2.3 billion at the large fast-food
chains but $29 billion at smaller ethnic and regional mom-and-pop restaurants. They spent another $10 billion in moderate-priced restaurants, including $4 billion in ethnic restaurants, and another $7 billion at expensive restaurants.

By the 1980s ethnic restaurants constituted 10 percent of all restaurants in the country, although they were most prominent in the Northeast and West. Chinese food made up 30 percent of the total, and the three cuisines of China, Italy, and Mexico represented 70 percent of all ethnic restaurants. In every part of the country, chain restaurants also offered two or more cuisines, sometimes in combinations like “Mediterranean.” French and Italian might appear together on a menu, or Spanish, Mexican, Greek, or kosher together with soul. Corporate restaurant chains tried to succeed with fusion dishes as diverse as Oriental- (or Mexican- or Italian-) filled potato skins or Gianni’s Little Italy Blackened (that is, Cajun-style) Chicken Broccoli Alfredo. Or, for a still smaller tab, Americans in the immigrant-poor South could eat at Applebees, which experimented with Chinese stir-fry fajita-style, finished at the table; their advertising campaign called the food “stir crazy.”

Outside the restaurant industry, food writers have sought to educate customers interested in exploring ethnic food at home and on their own without the pressure of performing properly in a restaurant. In 1985 and 1986, in a number of articles, the food writer Nancy Jenkins instructed New York Times readers about “tracking down Oriental ingredients” and exploring New York’s ethnic markets “in pursuit of the perfect ingredient.” The suburbanite Vilma Chantiles combined similar guidance with recipes in her 1984 book, The New York Ethnic Food Market.

For yet more modest pocketbooks, far from the multi-ethnic groceries and restaurants of New York and Miami, other food writers have provided instructions for creating fusion cuisine in one’s own kitchen, using corporate products. In the traditionally more conservative South, Jane Snow showed readers of the Charlotte Observer how to make “rapid ravioli” using frozen wonton wrappers. The food section of that day’s newspaper also contained a recipe for “black-eyed peas and Chinese greens over rice,” billed as the “ultimate fusion dish.” It was indeed a three-way fusion of southern, Asian, and Mexican; its ingredients included jalapeno and serrano chiles.

Corporate processors quickly caught the fusion-food trend that had begun in upscale restaurants. One newspaper advertising flyer urged consumers to “have your meat loaf 3 ways—Italian, spicy, or Cajun with salsa.” Months before, the same page urged its southern readers to “try another mom’s meat loaf for a change.” Recipes included “tejano picadillo meat loaf,” “Polish-style meat loaf,” and “spicy sauerbraten meat loaf.”

Food conglomerates saw fusion dishes as an ideal way to market several product lines at once: thus the invention and marketing of biscuit-topped Italian casserole (using Hungry Jack Buttermilk Biscuits, Sargento mozzarella, and frozen green beans). Doritos offered “Pizza Hut”-flavored tortilla chips for “pizza cravers.” Fiesta marketed nacho-flavored bagel bites. Advertising flyers recommended Fettucine Alfredo Hamburger Helper, and Godfather’s Taco Pizza or Beef Tortilla Pizza (which used a tortilla as pizza crust).

American consumers were urged to transform frozen pierogies into a Mexican dish with salsa or picante sauce and to try Velveeta Italiana (“the mild flavor of mozzarella and parmesan cheeses”). Coordinating marketing for their several ethnic labels, corporations responded with Country Line shredded taco cheddar and monterey jack for a special Cinco de Mayo advertising campaign.

Corporate production has made salsa the American success story of recent years, dethroning ketchup as the king of American condiments in total sales in 1991. The process took fifty years. Salsa’s corporate story replicates that of many other ethnic foods. The first mass producer of salsa was Pace Foods of San Antonio, and its market was local. Founder Dave Pace was a native of San Antonio but not a Mexican-American. His company began bottling and selling salsa in 1948. Pace knew the market in San Antonio, where even Anglo eating habits reflected the long history of exchanges with Mexican consumers and marketers in the region. But mastering the technology of mass manufacturing for distant markets was more complex. He explained, “In ’47, my sauce bottles exploded all over the grocery shelves because I couldn’t get the darned formula right.”

Pace Picante Sauce remained popular mainly in parts of the Southwest until, according to one analyst, “the hippies came along” and business exploded.48 Searching for the ethnic origins of the rapidly spreading product in the mid-1970s, the Texas writer Randall Benham visited the Pace facilities.
He found a business managed (and soon to be owned) by Christopher (Kit) Goldsby, the socially prominent Spanish-speaking son of a hacendado in Mexico—Dave Pace's son-in-law. The spice expert at Pace was a man named Lou Rasplika, popularly known to his colleagues as "Dr. Pepper." Goldsby explained the strategy behind the company's expansion into a mass market: "Our marketing philosophy is that people should put the sauce on anything that doesn't move. Sure, our name is Mexican; I guess I'll have to admit that. But we'd drop the word 'picante' in a minute if it wasn't already too late."  

In a familiar pattern, Campbell Soups acquired Pace Foods in 1994, when it was "the world's largest producer of Mexican sauces." Pace had already turned down bids from Heinz and from Lea & Perrins. The deal cost Campbell's $1.1 billion. Other salsa producers (Old El Paso, Ortega) had already been bought by other corporate giants. Corporate observers did joke about the odd mix of corporate cultures brought together through the Pace buy-out, but they saw it as a Southwest/Northeast clash, not a Mexican/Anglo one: Would Pace executives wear their cowboy boots to the traditionally conservative Campbell's corporate center founded by the Dornance family of Philadelphia's Main Line, or would they adopt the uniform pin-stripe suits associated with East Coast corporite life?  

In any case, Campbell Soups made no change in Goldsby's marketing philosophy. "Pace belongs on everything except ice cream," it insisted. Apparently consumers agreed: "Thanks to their sharp taste and low fat count, the fast-growing Mexican sauces have been appearing on everything from pizzas to bagels." Salsa producers began their own fusion experiments: One writer found Bubba Brand Y'Alsa (made with okra and black-eyed peas) and Grandma's Recipe Rugelach's El Rancho, a jalapeno jelly pastry billed as a Jewish-Mexican dessert. In 1996 Pace even trumpeted its development of a "heatless" jalapeno pepper.  

Some corporate analysts, aware of the growing Hispanic population of the United States, assumed that other Mexican-origin foods would follow in the wake of salsa. The milling industry's national newsletter predicted that tortillas would soon stand "bag to bag with bread in supermarkets and become a staple in American kitchens." That certainly seems possible in a country where people like Lisa Wong, the granddaughter of a Chinese immigrant and the operator of two popular Mexican restaurants in San Antonio, can declare, "I was brought up with tortillas, and they are like sliced bread to me." Her grandmother even made them.  

But "becoming American" has traditionally required mass production. Some point out that tortilla factories were operating in San Antonio as early as the 1920s, while others trace factory manufacturing of tortillas only to the late 1960s when El Chico's Restaurant began making them for their chain. Will those with cultural expertise dominate production for the mass market, as they clearly do not for salsa? Some, at least, are trying to survive the stiff competition of a booming market. In Austin, two major tortilla factories are owned by in-laws Ernestine Galindo (of "El Galindo," with 80 percent of its grocery-store customers Anglos) and Joe Galindo (of El Lago, which markets mainly to Mexican restaurants). If past patterns hold, however, it will be General Foods or Beatrice or Per, not El Galindo or El Lago, that brings tortillas to the mass market, making them, finally, firmly American.

With more, and new, ethnic foods both popular and en route to becoming American through mass production or incorporation in new regional creoles, culinary Americanization in the late twentieth century does not duplicate the food fights of the century's early decades. Some things have, in fact, changed. When The New York Times reported on a culinary assimilation program for Westchester County immigrants, they featured a group of suburban Larchmont housewives who opened their homes regularly to Japanese neighbors to teach them how to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and pot roast. One participant said of the Japanese women, "They have to get hip because their children are plunged into the mainstream of American society... It's hard, and they're fed up." Many of the Japanese women believed that Americans put no time or effort into meal preparation and eat only fast foods. The housewives aimed to change that stereotype, by taking the Japanese women on trips to shop for food ingredients at local supermarkets. According to Lauren Groveman, the teacher of the class, some immigrant women "will travel miles to a Japanese grocery store just to buy a can of Campbell's soup that is written in Japanese letters." Quite unlike past Americanization courses, these upscale Japanese immigrant women paid $350 to attend five classes.
Culinary Americanization work now more often emphasizes immigrant gifts and cross-cultural communication than the benefits of American food. Cornmeal and codfish have almost completely disappeared from nutritionists' lists of healthy foods. In a YMCA program for refugees at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida in spring and summer 1975, newcomers from Southeast Asia received instead a quick introduction to ethnic pride, American style. YMCA workers encouraged the refugees to produce a cookbook *Happy in My Stomach: Tai vui trong Long* as “one way of building a bridge of understanding” between the two cultures. Social workers with low-income clients planned a cooking school for Vietnamese and attempted to show their clients how to prepare American and Vietnamese-style meals on a limited budget, but their guidebook urged them to “remember the importance of fellowship,” for cooking “brings people together for both learning and fellowship.”

Dieticians and health workers continue to offer nutritional education, but they are careful to tailor it to the particular ethnic group. The Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity, through its Emergency Food-Navajo Homemaker Program, advised Native-American women on how to use commodity foods donated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and included pictorial recipes for modified native dishes and “guidelines for a good cook and homemaker” in its cookbook. Projects like Healthy Black People (of the West Tennessee Area Health Education Center in Somerville, Tennessee) suggest how to modify southern diets to diminish salt and fat intake, reminding African-American clients of their particularly high rates of hypertension and heart disease. During the 1990s the American Dietetic Association, together with the American Diabetic Association, published a series on “Ethnic and Regional Food Practices” which explained ethnic foodways to healthcare workers, so they could in turn help patients adapt traditional recipes to requirements of a low-fat, low-calorie, or diabetic diet. Their cookbooks introduced new American-style recipes while also adapting traditional favorites like Navajo fry bread or Vietnamese spring rolls to a diabetic’s special dietary constraints.

Contemporary Americanizers exhibit the respect for immigrant food gifts and traditions that one would expect of convinced cultural pluralists. There have been no real food fights recently. One skirmish, however, involved those controversial figures of the past—street vendors. In 1977 in New York, new immigrant vendors—many of them operating illegally and selling shish kebab, felafel, quiche, and Asian foods—began giving hot dogs at licensed carts a run for their money. They precipitated what participants and observers jokingly called the Great Hot Dog War of 1977. At that time, John Zervas, an Athenian who had arrived in the United States in 1962, operated a fleet of Yum-Yum hot dog carts under a five-year $80,000 city contract. Like many Greeks, Zervas had begun his work in a diner kitchen, then operated seven coffee shops before turning to push-carts. In 1977 he and his 60 vendors enjoyed exclusive rights to sell push-cart hot dogs in Central Park. The city preferred dealing with one man, and believed they limited the number of vendors and the quantity of litter by doing so. Immigrants eager to break Zervas’s special monopoly disagreed. When independent vendors invaded his turf, Zervas called in the police, the independents marched down Fifth Avenue, and Mayor Abe Beame eventually canceled Zervas’s city contract. Consumers joined the newest immigrant entrepreneurs in calling the city’s regulation of vendors “a repression of the free-enterprise system.”

Korean produce sellers have their own complaints about police harassment. They claim that the laws governing the sale of produce from sidewalk extensions of stores are impossibly complex, so that they find themselves unintentionally in violation even when they operate legal businesses. While agreeing they should obey the laws, Korean produce sellers find them “unfair, irregular and very cruel,” and a real impediment to business. Policemen, they complain, “give tickets without warning . . . They should be patient with us, help us more.” Like the vendors and their consumers, the Korean produce sellers draw effectively on deeply rooted American rhetoric to defend themselves. “There should not be so much red tape to the American dream.” These businessmen, too, strike a chord with consumer critics of American governmental bureaucracy. In this respect, they are a far cry from the Progressive Era, when native consumers created new governmental bureaucracies to produce the kinds of regulations about which Korean businessmen today complain.

Still, not every American consumer admires the new exchanges and blending now occurring from the lowest to the highest ends of the food marketplace. Multiculturalism has its outspoken critics, especially among those who fear the abandonment of a unified national culture and the
concomitant “disuniting” of a great nation, to use Arthur Schlesinger’s phrase. So too does multi-ethnic American eating have its critics—as it always has. In a diatribe worthy of Octavia Paz, Regina Schrambling of Newsweek rebelled at facing another meal of “Thai barbecue pizza, moo shu duck burritos, blueberry soup with lemongrass” or “Mexican tamales . . . stuffed with Norwegian farm-raised salmon.” Defending her memories of her own mom’s cooking and of authentic regional and ethnic cuisines, Schrambling blasted Americans’ “nondiscriminating attitude toward ingredients” and “mushiness over restaurant types,” and dismissed new creoles as insults to other countries’ food and as the source of a new, dreary sameness in American eating. “In dog breeding,” she concludes, “they would consider it mongrelization.”62 Other critics specifically associate this mongrelization with California, where, one chef complained, “they don’t have any basics. They are always trying something new. Everything is mixed up.”63

How can one not recall the WPA administrator of the 1930s, who had sniffed at the “mongrel character” of California cuisine sixty years ago? We are scarcely in the midst of a late twentieth-century version of that earlier food fight. Yet conflicts over food remain very real expressions of two perpetually conflicting visions of American life. The dream of a stable and unifying national cuisine is rarely at issue, and critics generally decry the mass-produced foods which in fact provide homogeneity and standardized eating across the nation. Instead, current conflicts about what we eat seem to revolve around two larger issues: whether the mixing and matching of cuisines and ingredients signify a spirit of toleration that is the greatest source of American unity and strength, or whether they represent just the opposite—a lack of respect for the ethnic and regional traditions that preserve the many differing histories of our people. These issues about what we eat, even when the voices that express them are quieter, more accommodating, and more civil than at the turn of the century, are important precisely because they embody larger questions about who we Americans really are.

CONCLUSION

Who Are We?

Anthropologists tell us that when human groups come together, fear and curiosity commingle. Fears generate hatred expressed as racial discrimination, immigration restriction, competition over resources, and violent personal confrontations; curiosity, on the other hand, encourages mutual exploration and accommodation. American foodways are the product of centuries of curiosity fueling exploration and accommodation in culinary forms. However, much Americans have feared people different from themselves, we have ignored those fears when we believed we would find new pleasures by crossing cultural boundaries. Among other pleasures—from singing and dancing to making love—we have eagerly sought new foods and new tastes.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin—who in 1825 confidently announced, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are”—would have no trouble describing American cultural identities. Our food reveals that we are cosmopolitans and iconoclasts; we are tolerant adventurers who do not feel constrained by tradition. We “play with our food” far more readily than we preserve the culinary rules of our varied ancestors. With the bagel changing from a distinctively Jewish icon to a national fast food, and the proliferation of Tex-Mex, New York deli, and “new Florida” creoles, Americans have no single national cuisine. But we do have a common culinary culture: What unites American eaters culturally is how we eat,
not what we eat. As eaters, all Americans mingle the culinary traditions of many regions and cultures within ourselves. We are multi-ethnic eaters.

Two characteristics distinguish American eating habits from those of other countries: our tastes for standardized mass-produced processed dishes and for a diverse variety of multi-ethnic specialties. The former give a familiar and predictable homogeneity to supermarket shelves and roadside fast-food landscapes across the country. This is what first-time visitors from abroad, along with recently arrived immigrants, initially perceive as American food. But alongside the factory-baked spongy white bread, quick-frozen vegetables, and endless rows of identical tin cans, one discovers an extraordinary diversity. There is liver pudding in Carolina meat compartments and scrapple in Philadelphia; turnip greens in Charleston but lemongrass in San Francisco. A traveler who is willing to forgo a Taco Bell or Burger King can lunch instead at a small mom-and-pop diner in the Ozarks, or try the lunchtime buffet at a midwestern Mandarin Palace. And in the evening, a tourist or native almost anywhere in the United States can choose between chain-restaurant turf-and-surf and fusion cuisine prepared by a new immigrant chef from Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, or Central Europe. Eating homogeneous, processed, mass-produced foods is no more, or less, American than enjoying the multi-ethnic mixtures of particular regions.

These two varieties of quintessentially American foods correspond to our sometimes conflicting views of our own identities. While some Americans insist they are American because they have no ethnic or regional loyalties, others see their ethnic and regional ties as necessary components of their firmly national selves. The first view resembles the labeling of mass-produced American foods. Regardless of cultural origin, foods that are mass produced for a national market generally lose their ethnic identities in the United States. Hot dogs and Cracker Jacks, fried chicken and Fritos all emerged from specific cultural communities (German, southern, and Mexican) but lost their ethnic ties. Few people today think of hot dogs or Cracker Jacks as German, Fritos as Mexican-American, or Kentucky Fried Chicken as “soul food.”

Theorists of American identity, from Crevcoeur to Arthur Schlesinger, have suggested that immigrants and racial minorities should do the same, and that Americans are best united as a people when they lose their ties and loyalties to particularistic regional and cultural communities.

But other foods which seem just as quintessentially American retain their ethnic associations, even when they become widely popular with eaters across the nation. The chilli of San Antonio is generally believed to be of Mexican origin; it provides much of the “Mex” in the region's Tex-Mex cuisine. Anglos and Spanish-speaking Tejanos, along with new immigrants to the region, have all enjoyed Tex-Mex foods equally. Now people across the United States eat them and consider Tex-Mex an American regional cuisine. There can be no “Tex-Mex” without its “Mex” ingredients, but Tex-Mex has a clear national identity that is American, not Mexican. In a similar vein, new ethnics of the 1970s argued that new immigrants had acquired ethnic identities in order to become American, and that their hyphenated, or creole, identities—like Tex-Mex, African-American, or Cajun—were a form of Americanization. In this view of American identity, loyalties to ethnic group, region, and nation complement one another.

The history of neither mass-produced foods nor regional cuisines shows Americans as people of conservative, unyielding ethnic tastes. It calls vividly into question Americans’ most popular image of a multicultural United States as a mosaic of discrete racial and ethnic groups living in peace and harmony (or even in brotherly conflict) with one another. A food metaphor for this questionable view of multiculturalism might be the salad bowl, where each ingredient retains its own distinct appearance and taste. The most important and permanent ingredients in the American salad bowl have been its regional cuisines—New England, southern, Tex-Mex, midwestern, California, southwestern—not its ethnic culinary traditions. Cookbooks sometimes present American eaters as carrying on distinct ethnic traditions, with their separate chapters on “African-American” or “German-American” recipes. But in fact, both African-Americans and German-Americans eat a diet that mingles foods of their ancestors with those of their many neighbors. What makes the United States multicultural is not so much its many separate culinary traditions as it is Americans’ desire to eat a multi-ethnic mix of foods, and to make this mix part of themselves.
In some ways, the old, and out-of-favor, metaphor of the melting pot provides the best description of American eating. The culinary melting pot can be a midwestern casserole, a southern gumbo, a New England stew, or a California "clay pot." In the regional cuisine of each pot, a tomato may give some of its flavor to a sauce or to its neighbor ingredient, be it rice, potatoes, or pasta; the flavor and character of the tomato changes when cooked with chiles, oregano, or soy sauce. Tomatoes blended with shrimp and rice give a low-country Carolina taste, while tomato sauce on rice-a-roni gives us a Mediterranean/Asian "San Francisco Treat." The culinary melting pot produces multi-ethnic diversity, not all-American uniformity. It produces Portuguese-Americans who favor pasta in New York and rice in Hawaii; it produces African-Americans who eat Chinese food on Tuesday, lasagna on Wednesday, and collard greens with pot liquor on Thursday. It produces identities that are blended creoles, not the culinary equivalent of five (or twenty-five) isolated ethnic groups, each with its own foodways. It makes a multi-ethnic American gumbo or stew, not a multicultural salad of discrete ethnic groups.

Blending in the culinary melting pot has produced little of the disunity and strife that opponents of multiculturalism warn of when they advocate uniform, un-hyphenated American identities for all. Culinary exchanges have been less violent than many other cross-cultural contacts. Food fights have occurred, especially during periods of rapid boundary crossing and creolization, notably in the aftermath of the mass migrations of the nineteenth century. But these food fights seem laughably mild, and limited in scope, compared with other cross-cultural battles. No one feared that fast fights might break out the first time satay appeared for sale on the Washington Mall. Such fights have been common enough when the first Irish Catholic entered a Boston public school in the 1840s, when the first Mexican or Italian moved into a formerly German or Irish neighborhood, and when a white daughter announced to her parents, "Guess who's coming to dinner." Americans have not been as tolerant of and curious about their neighbors as they have about their neighbors' foods. They have more often feared them, creating deeply entrenched, popular notions of firmly bounded racial and ethnic groups that demand exclusive loyalties from their members.

Such notions seem to deny that we are what we eat. They suggest that multi-ethnic eating is nothing more than a casual consumer choice, and quite unimportant when compared with the strength of primordial racial and tribal loyalties. But creole American eating is not an isolated example of multi-ethnic identity in American culture. It has important counterparts wherever Americans seek pleasure, most notably in the history of American music.

Music, like food, is an important marker of identity; as one Puerto Rican in New York told an ethnomusicologist, "My music is my flag." Blended musical forms like jazz, and cross-over performers from Vic Damone and Elvis to Vanilla Ice, are musical analogs to Cincinnati chili and Pizza Hut. Sharing and borrowing has been as common—and as peaceful—in the musical as in the culinary realm. And musical blends, like culinary creoles, have varied regionally, largely because differing groups have blended songs and identities with one another in the Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest.

Key to identity and culture in both American music and eating is the tension between people's love of the familiar and the pleasure they find in desiring, creating, and experiencing something new. This tension preceded the commercialization of musical and food exchanges, but has become more obvious with the growth of musical and culinary marketplaces and big business at the national level. In the histories of blues and of ethnic foods, corporate producers and mass market consumers appropriated (or "co-opted") and adapted (or " adulterated") the cultural creations of ethnic or racial enclaves, from rumba to country ballad. In both cases, however, it was an enclave producer of music and food—whether black bluesman or Chinese chef—who first sought a wider market and initiated the transformation of their products.

In food, as in music, the marketplace followed and facilitated a longstanding human curiosity about new sensory pleasures. Market exchanges did not corrupt a natural or exclusive human preference for culinary conservatism, hometown music, or the comfort foods and melodies of childhood. Businessmen from within and outside enclave communities made profits off consumers' desire for novelty, but they did not invent that desire. Identities reflected in consumer choices should not be dismissed as
superficial simply because they are expressed in the marketplace. Consumers' preferences for multi-ethnic food and multi-ethnic music remain an important expression of their identities as Americans.

Consumers of music and food did find that mass production by modern corporations could not deliver the complex associations that tied familiar music and dishes to their local communities or childhood experiences. African-Americans resented Elvis or Vanilla Ice for "stealing" black music for the same reasons that many Italian-Americans disdained Pizza Hut's crust and sauce. Both groups experienced a sense of loss as their cultural creations changed and found acceptance in wider circles. But both also responded to their losses as consumers; they went to market in search of a "mo' better blues," or a more authentic pizza crust. To the degree that American culture is a consumer culture, Americans will probably always hunger for the tastes and sounds we believe we have lost to commercial producers. And our efforts to find "authentic foods" and "authentic sounds" will generate demand for small food stores and live jazz clubs, and for face-to-face relations between the shopkeeper and the consumer or the musician and the audience. Ethnic and local loyalties repeatedly generate critiques of mass consumer culture, even while the marketplace remains the arena for expressing ethnic and local identities.

They guarantee that small businessmen and musicians with clear identities as immigrant, ethnic, and regional Americans will continue to compete successfully against big business.

Cross-cultural culinary contacts have been peaceful not only because they involve the search for pleasure but because they are commercial exchanges. Consumers come to American markets expecting bounty and diversity at a low cost. Most have found what they sought, along with a pleasant sensation of choice and of individual freedom. The impersonal rules of the marketplace help ease fears of cultural difference: buying and selling are limited, public, and highly ritualized forms of social interaction. In the marketplace, food becomes easily detached from its culture of origin, and from the people who first enjoyed it. Appealing sights, smells, and sounds suffice to win new customers. Consumers need not convert to Judaism or have Jewish friends to relish lox and bagels; they don't need to understand Islam or its faithful to enjoy bagels.

The pursuit of pleasure with minimal obligation encourages Americans to cross cultural boundaries and to incorporate parts of other cultures into our intimate lives. But it also exposes us regularly to the fears that cultural differences generate. Americans have been far more willing to celebrate multi-ethnic eating than the pleasures of cross-cultural sex and marriage.

Still, throughout our national history, cross-over has occurred in this realm just as it has in food and music, and the numbers of Americans who are consciously multi-ethnic in a familial and genetic sense are not trivial, and they are growing.

In the past, laws forbade cross-cultural marriage; more recently there have been battles over whether to include a "multiracial" census category or to maintain the convenient fiction that Americans are members of discrete ethnic groups. The battles are unlikely to end soon, as the are driven by forces that range from racial to legitimate worries or concerns about the loss of group solidarity, history, and cultural identity.

In a bountiful society where fears of cultural difference nevertheless persist, food remains the least controversial, the most typical and reliable, and the cheapest of all ways to find pleasure in life. Millions of ordinary Americans—not just robber barons, bohemians, or yuppies—have chosen its enjoyments, and with it culinary plagiarism and gastronomic cosmopolitanism. As eaters, Americans have long embraced identities that are rooted in interaction and affiliation with other Americans of widely diverse backgrounds. The foods we eat commemorate a long history of peaceful cultural interaction; our multi-ethnic eating daily proclaims our satisfying sense of affiliation with one another. The marketplace, and its consumer culture, may be a thin thread on which to build cross-cultural understanding. But given the depth of American fears about cultural diversity, it is better to have that thread than not.

If our food tastes good, gives us pleasure, and connects us—if only commercially or sentimentally—to our neighbors, why not embrace those ties and the multi-ethnic identities they create? Americans have not proved to be strict culinary judges; we prefer the pleasures of novelty and blending. Such appetites keep corporate managers and small businessmen alike hopping to deliver the diversity that we Americans crave but also crave. As eaters, Americans reject uniformity or adherence to a single cultural experience. Why should we then insist that each American "belong" to only one cultural community, or that happiness can be found by
narrowing, rather than broadening, the circles of American solidarity? Few would prefer a world where fear of the exotic or foreign again drew rigid racial boundaries in the form of Jim Crow laws or immigrant ghettos. Nor would we necessarily live in a happier world if Americans chose to turn up their noses—or even spit out—the foods of newcomers. Rather than dismiss eating as a trivial consumer choice, Americans might do better to take our eating choices very seriously. Then we could recognize and celebrate that indeed we are what we eat—not a multi-ethnic nation, but a nation of multi-ethnics.