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# 'American Cuisine' Review: The National Palate

A history of food in the United States, from regional styles in New England and the South, to the ascendancy of McDonald's.



PHOTO: CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

By *Rien Fertel*

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Step aside, apple pie, your time has passed. Today, a new set of foods anchor American tables, a bountiful buffet of tacos and ramen, kimchi and craft whiskey, Impossible Burgers and Nashville hot chicken, oat milk and CBD-infused sparkling water. Right now, there's no food as American as Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

"Notwithstanding the difficulty of identifying it," Paul Freedman writes in his history of the national palate, "there is an American cuisine." In "American Cuisine: And How It Got This Way," the Yale University history professor and culinary scholar eschews the banal, dish-centric narrative of countless similar titles to propose a grand theory of the American appetite. As in Italy or India, where most every town can claim at least one local specialty, regionalism, he

argues, determined how Americans ate until the late 19th century. Since then, a contradictory but compatible relationship between standardization and variety has defined American cuisine. In these modern times, for example, you can eat or drink anything you'd like, as long as it's pumpkin-spiced.

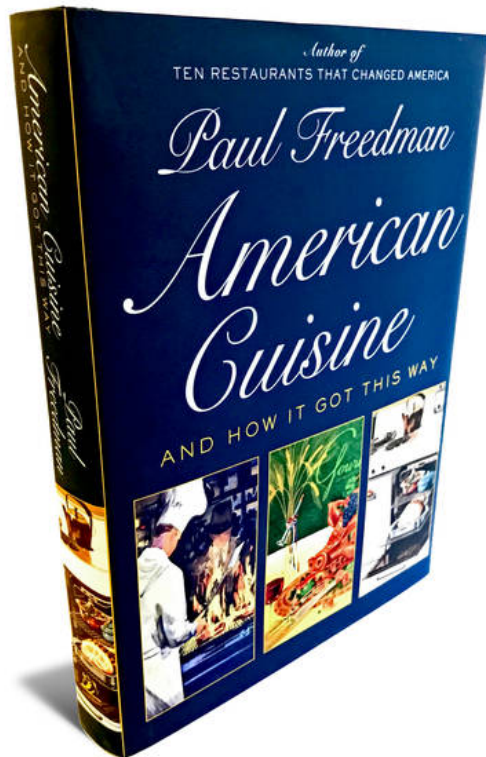


PHOTO: WSJ

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## AMERICAN CUISINE

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By Paul Freedman  
(Liveright, 451 pages, \$39.95)

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Long before it became a favorite flavor of millennials, a pair of proto-pumpkin spice mixtures appeared in Amelia Simmons's "American Cookery" (1796), generally considered the first American cookbook, alongside recipes for a cranberry-sauce tart and roast turkey. On their way to becoming staples of the Thanksgiving table, those dishes characterized New England cooking, America's first and, in Mr. Freedman's estimation, "first forgotten cuisine." But other regional staples, including baked beans, brown bread and jonnycakes—a specialty once held in such high esteem that the Rhode Island legislature came to blows after a failed attempt to codify an official state recipe—have largely disappeared. "A strictly regional dinner," one early roving restaurant critic wrote in 1955, "is becoming a thing of the past."

Even in the South, the land that gave gumbo and barbecue to the world, culinary nostalgists resisted the

disappearance of regional recipes. Decades of cookbook writers, restaurant owners and product advertisers resorted to racist Mammy stereotypes and other cornpone caricatures to evoke the old South. Later, more enlightened Southerners employed the myth of local exceptionalism. "We know we are Southerners because

we do eat possum and grits and okra,” the North Carolina chef Bill Neal noted. “When we no longer eat these foods, we no longer will be Southerners.” He wrote these words in 1990, long after eaters gave up on possum, squirrel and other critters that once thrived in the Southern larder. Still the myth persists. Among the roughly 30 recipes included in Mr. Freedman’s book is one for baked raccoon, published in a rural Tennessee Baptist church community cookbook just last year.

The 20th century saw manufacturing and monopolization, middle-class mobility and the demise of the family farm lead to what Mr. Freedman calls “triumphant uniformity.” In 1905, for cite one example, the Department of Agriculture cataloged 14,000 varieties of apples grown over the previous century. By the 1960s supermarkets sold more or less three kinds: McIntosh, and golden and red Delicious.

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PREVIEW

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Post-Depression Americans demanded pabulum, and manufacturers responded with frozen TV dinners, frozen juice concentrate, frozen fish sticks “without that fishy taste.” Madison Avenue-tailored jingles, cartoon characters and celebrities marketed foods that doubled as nutrient-delivery vehicles. Kellogg’s Sugar Pops were “sweeter and the taste is new, they’re shot with sugar, through and through!” Wonder Bread helped “build strong bodies eight ways,” which

proved enough until the 1960s, when four more ways were discovered. The American predilection for predictability led to the chainification of supermarkets, restaurants and fast-food franchises. The rise of Piggly Wiggly allowed the

proliferation of Whole Foods, Howard Johnson's gave way to the ubiquity of McDonald's.

In one of the book's most fascinating chapters, Mr. Freedman argues that though so-called ethnic restaurants might promise infinite variety, they instead provide the comfort of familiarity. From sea to shining sea, Thai, Japanese and Mexican menus deliver few, if any, surprises. Chinese buffets are rife with Chinese-American inventions like chop suey. Ditto for spaghetti and meatballs in marinara sauce and eggplant Parmesan—American creations all.

In the third part of "American Cuisine," Mr. Freedman rushes to cover the past half-century in less than 100 pages, resulting in an ultimately underwhelming conclusion. Perhaps blame the 1970s, a transformative but confusing culinary era that the author resolves to label as "magical." That's one way to describe a decade that gave us affordable microwave ovens and time-sucking slow cookers (originally invented to accommodate Jewish Sabbath regulations), but also Chez Panisse and the Egg McMuffin. It was the golden age of food writers, like Edna Lewis, Calvin Trillin, and Jane and Michael Stern, who hit the road to discover what foodways the nation was in danger of losing and what its people stood to gain by reclaiming recipes of old. But it was also the decade when Gerald Ford called eating "a waste of time" and unvaryingly shoveled down an all-American Oval Office lunch of cottage cheese topped with onion slices or tomato quarters and dressed with A.1. Sauce, followed by a scoop of butter-pecan ice cream.

Mr. Freedman's study ends with a look at food in the year 2020 and beyond. After touching on meal kits and faddish Filipino fare, he writes of "the disastrous present reality and future danger of climate change and the growth of economic inequality." But he neglects to mention how the changing climate has already begun to alter how Americans actually eat, ushering in plant-based and lab-grown meats, hyperpersonalized microbiome diets, less seafood, less grain and more nutrient-rich renewable resources like—gulp!—algae. Pass the pumpkin spice.

*Mr. Fertel is the author of "The One True Barbecue" and, most recently, "Southern Rock Opera."*

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