

INTRODUCTION

The British-American Culinary Heritage

The United States may have won its political independence from Great Britain in 1783, but during the hundred-odd years that followed, Americans never liberated themselves from the British culinary heritage. Americans tended to eat more corn, pork, molasses, and indeed (according to nineteenth-century travelers from Britain) much more of everything than did the British. They drank more whiskey and cider but less ale and tea. In the grand scheme of things gastronomical, however, the American table remained what Louis Hartz claimed its polity to be: the product of a fragment of British culture.

Much about the edible flora and fauna of the Northern and Middle colonies was distinctive, and the semi-tropical South provided an abundance of foods that temperate Britain could not produce. And yet, as Waverley Root pointed out, the colonists “turned their backs on most of the new foods, often refusing to eat them until after Europe had accepted them and re-imported them to the land of their origin.”¹ The potato and tomato, which originated in native American Indian civilizations just to the south of them some millennia before, reached Anglo-America late in the eighteenth century, only after gaining grudging approval in Britain. Colonials accepted the pumpkins of the New World because they resembled European squash. Indian corn was integrated into the colonial diet mainly out of necessity: strains of European wheat did not begin to adapt to and thrive in America until the later eighteenth century, and wheat

remained expensive until the 1820s and 1830s. On the other hand, the colonials imported as many plants and seeds from Britain as they could, including their beloved apple trees, which flourished in the New World.²

British-American culinary conservatism can hardly be ascribed to the universally high regard with which British cuisine has been held, even by the British. (As Alistair Cooke has remarked, "A Briton telling an American about cooking is like the blind leading the one-eyed.") And yet, Americans manifested a remarkable degree of resistance to the culinary influence of other cultures. Even before independence, waves of immigrants from Europe and Africa washed onto America's shores, but left few traces of their cuisines on the American table. This continued to be the case after 1783, even though the proportion of immigrants of non-British origin rose. Then, only the Germans could be said to have substantially influenced American cooking, and they were Northern Europeans whose cuisine resembled that of the British.³

Vegetarian crusades of the 1830s and 1840s, inspired by Romantic and Puritanical notions, faced an enormous challenge, for people on both sides of the British North Atlantic were carnivores of the first order. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a romantic with profound vegetarian leanings, found evidence for his contention that meat was the brutish food *par excellence* in the fact that the British loved it so.⁴ Before the 1860s, pork was consumed in such large quantities in America that wags often suggested that the United States be rechristened "The Republic of Porkdom." Yet beef reigned supreme in status. "We are essentially a hungry *beef-eating* people, who live by eating," proclaimed a proud mid-nineteenth-century American frontier newspaper.⁵ Poultry and lamb were also held in high esteem in both nations, and raised breads, made of wheat, rye, oats and other grains, constituted, if not quite the traditional "staff of life," at least the staple filler. Porridges made from a variety of grains also provided sustenance, and puddings and pies containing a wide variety of meats and other foods were popular favorites.

On the other hand, consumption of vegetables and fruits was limited, relative to present-day standards. Like their counterparts in Britain, early New Englanders thought of vegetables as sauces to accompany meats, much in the way applesauce accompanies pork today, and they commonly referred to them as "garden sass." By the middle of the nineteenth century the potato and the cabbage were the predominant vegetables. Peas, beans, turnips, and onions joined them on the table with some regularity, but were served in relatively small portions. While lettuce was much appreciated among a small segment of the social elite attuned to the popularity of green salads dressed with oil and vinegar in France (it was called "French salad" in America),⁶ green and leafy vegetables were generally disdained. Other vegetables, such as tomatoes, were used mainly as condiments and were served in even smaller quantities. Root vegetables were as often

grown for fodder as for human consumption. An 1879 cookbook admonished Americans "to realize the wealth of green food abounding in their gardens and fields, which they have too long abandoned to their beasts of burden."⁷

Apples remained the most common fruit. The belief that they had medicinal properties was well-established by the nineteenth century. *Hall's Journal of Health* advised families to maintain a supply of at least two to ten barrels of apples, for they had "an admirable effect on the general system, often removing constipation, correcting acidities, and cooling off febrile conditions, more effectually than the most approved medicines." If Americans substituted them for pies, cakes, candies, and other sweets, "there would be a diminution in the sum total of doctors' bills in a single year."⁸

The narrow range of foods consumed by most British-Americans before the mid-nineteenth century has led many modern observers to remark on the monotony of their gastronomic lives.⁹ Contemporary critics, however, rarely remarked on this. Rather, many deplored its binding nature. The enormous amounts of meat and starch and the short shrift given to fresh fruits and vegetables made constipation the national curse of the first four or five decades of the nineteenth century in America.

As for the ways in which these foods were prepared, the major characteristic was an overwhelming heaviness. The favored method for preparing meat was to roast large fatty joints. Big chunks of meat or whole fowls were also boiled, but boiling was particularly popular for preparing vegetables, which were often subjected to this treatment for hours before being mashed into paste. It was commonly thought that the only way to rid potatoes of their supposed poisonous qualities was to boil them for extended periods of time. Foods fried in large quantities of lard or butter were also well appreciated, particularly in America.

Stewing, which elsewhere called for smaller pieces of meat, more seasonings, and the addition of a variety of vegetables, was not well regarded, particularly if the outcome was highly seasoned. The British upper classes spiced their food and beverages formidably until the mid-1660s, but by the late seventeenth and eighteenth century a modicum of restraint had gained the upper hand. Salt and small amounts of pepper, cloves, cinnamon, mace, ginger, nutmeg, and a few herbs were the main British/American seasonings.

A relatively light hand with spices continued to characterize cooking in both countries during the nineteenth century. Not only were spicy foods blamed for inducing a craving for alcohol, many people shared the notion of antebellum American food reformer Sylvester Graham that they stimulated inordinate appetites for sex. Thus, although intrepid sailors, businessmen, and soldiers of both countries now roamed the world, only occasionally were the exotic spices and herbs of the non-Northern Euro-

pean world adopted in sufficient quantities to add more than, say, the minor titillation which a touch of “curry powder” gave to a bland white sauce.

Although today’s reconstructed herb gardens of any number of ersatz “pioneer villages” demonstrate that many herbs were grown, they were used mainly for medicinal rather than culinary purposes. An 1873 article on “potherbs,” that is, those used for imparting taste in cooking, in *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* discussed only parsley, sage, thyme, marjoram, mint, and savory, remarking that the last was seldom used.¹⁰ Herbs “should be used in small quantities and only by those who require a stimulant,” warned *The Ladies’ Magazine* in 1833.¹¹ Needless to say, the glorious garlic bulb was little known and regarded with a mixture of horror and awe. “Gar-licks,” said one of America’s first cookbooks in the early nineteenth century, “though used by the French, are better adapted to medicine than cooking.”¹²

Spices were more common in desserts, for when sweetness was involved Anglo-American taste buds lost their delicate sensitivity. Particularly after 1750, the two nations seem to have shared the Atlantic world’s greatest sweet tooth, with America running second only to Britain in per capita consumption of sugar.¹³ By the mid-nineteenth century, falling prices for cane and beet sugars encouraged soaring consumption of these sweeteners among all classes. British “puddings,” originally main course fare, now became progressively sweeter and more diverse, mutating into an incredible variety of hot, cold, baked and steamed puddings, pies, tarts, creams, molds, charlottes, bettys, fools, syllabubs, junkets, and ices.¹⁴ These recipes were avidly imitated in the United States. In 1879, when 175 genteel women of Virginia pooled their favorite recipes into a cookbook, over one-third of the book consisted of recipes for desserts, including separate chapters not only for cakes and pies but also for icing, gingerbread, pudding sauces, fritters and pancakes, ice cream and frozen custard, jellies, fruit desserts, preserves and fruit jellies, as well as thirty-six pages of pudding recipes, and another long chapter devoted to jelly, blanc-mange, Charlotte russe, baked custard, creams, and various other desserts.¹⁵

Many of these concoctions used heavy doses of cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and mace to complement a level of sweetness which would set many a modern amalgam filling to screaming. The Beecher sisters, Catharine and Harriet Beecher Stowe, condemned the American taste for over-spiced “heavy sweets,” and put the blame squarely on their “phlegmatic ancestors,” the English. “Witness the national recipe for plum pudding,” they wrote. “Take a pound of every indigestible substance you can think of, boil into a cannon-ball, and serve in flaming brandy.”¹⁶

Sweetness also served to counter the blandness or excessive saltiness of

many so-called savory dishes. Sweet or sweet and sour condiments were particularly popular as accompaniments for meats, and as sugar prices declined in the nineteenth century they soared in popularity. Cucumbers, onions, and other vegetables were preserved in sugar, salt, and vinegar. Tomatoes and mushrooms were boiled down with sugar, salt, pepper, and vinegar to produce "catsup." The result was a cuisine which, even excluding desserts, relied more on sweetness than did any other major cuisine in the world.¹⁷

To nineteenth-century observers, the major differences between the American and British diets could usually be summed up in one word: abundance. Virtually every foreign visitor who wrote about American eating habits expressed amazement, shock, and even disgust at the quantity of food consumed. In his description of mid-century America the English novelist Anthony Trollope warned English readers to bear in mind "that 10,000 or 40,000 inhabitants in an American town . . . is a number which means much more than would be implied by any similar number as to an old town in Europe. Such a population in America would consume double the amount of beef which it would in England . . ." ¹⁸ Long before Americans' overflowing self-serve "salad bars," "all-you-can-eat buffets," and "smorgs" came to symbolize to overseas visitors an obsession with quantity, the groaning boards of America's hotels struck Europeans the same way. Unlike most of their European counterparts, the hotels which spread out across the country in the 1840s and 1850s included meals in their prices, the so-called "American Plan," and they vied with each other to make the "boards" upon which their food was served literally groan. The enormous breakfasts aroused particular comment. The Englishman Thomas Hamilton's first encounter with an American breakfast, in a New York City hotel, was a table "loaded with solid viands of all descriptions . . . while, in the occasional intervals, were distributed dishes of rolls, toast and cakes of buckwheat and Indian corn." Had it not been early morning, he would easily have mistaken it for a dinner table.¹⁹

Even later in the century, when dishes came to be ordered from menus, the apparent indifference of American hotel patrons to wasting food struck Europeans as a product of its abundance in America. "The thing which strikes me most disagreeably . . . is the sight of the tremendous waste of food that goes on at every meal," wrote a European recalling his sojourns in nineteenth-century American hotels. "There are rarely fewer than fifty different dishes on the *menu* at dinner time. Every day at every meal you see people order three or four times as much of this food as they could under any circumstance eat, and picking at and spoiling one dish after another, send the bulk away uneaten."²⁰ Actually, his estimate of fifty choices on the *menus* was rather low. Two authors in a subsequent issue of the same magazine refer to dinner menus of one hundred and ten

items and breakfast menus with at least seventy-five, while the dinner menu of the New York City Brevoort House hotel for an ordinary Thursday some years earlier, in November 1867, listed a choice of 145 items.²¹

Critics of American cooking often blamed abundance for encouraging poor preparation. The Englishwoman Frances Trollope, a caustic critic of American manners during the Jacksonian era, was impressed by the "excellence, abundance, and cheapness" of the food in the market in Cincinnati, where she lived. However, she thought that this abundance contributed to sloppy preparation and that "the ordinary mode of living was abundant but not delicate."²² The Beecher sisters declared the American table to be inferior to that of France and England because "it presents a fine abundance of material, carelessly and poorly treated. The management of food is nowhere in the world, perhaps, more slovenly and wasteful. Everything betokens that want of care that waits on abundance."²³ "In no other land," wrote Juliet Corson, the genteel head of the New York Cooking School in 1879, "is there such a profusion of food, and certainly in none is so much wasted from sheer ignorance, and spoiled by bad cooking."²⁴

Many were struck by the American attachment to the frying pan and the consequent greasiness of American foods. "To a gentleman with a keen appetite, the *coup d'oeil* of the dinner table was far from unpleasing," wrote Hamilton of a typical American hotel dinner. "The number of dishes was very great. The style of cooking neither French nor English, though certainly approaching nearer to the latter than to the former." However, "the dressed dishes were decidedly bad, the sauces being composed of little else than liquid grease." Only the sheer multitude of dishes enabled him to discover "some unobjectionable viands," proving again the wisdom of the old adage, "in the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom."²⁵

Abundance also seemed to breed a vague indifference to food, manifested in a tendency to eat and run, rather than to dine and savor. For the American man, said Chevalier, "meal time is not . . . a period of relaxation, in which his mind seeks repose in the bosom of his friends; it is only a disagreeable interruption of business, an interruption to which he yields because it cannot be avoided, but which he abridges as much as possible."²⁶ The national motto, according to one European, was "Gobble, gulp, and go."²⁷ Foreigners often remarked on the eerie silence that reigned at American dinner tables, as diners seemed to concentrate on getting the tiresome burden of stuffing themselves out of the way in as short a time as possible. Charles Dickens found American banquets funereal and stupefyingly boring. Judging from the silence, he said, one would think the diners were assembled to lament the passing of a dear friend, rather than to joyfully contribute to their own survival.²⁸ "In my neighborhood there was no conversation," recalled the genial Hamilton of a typical hotel dining room. "Each individual seemed to *pitchfork* his food

down his gullet, without the smallest attention to the wants of his neighbor.”²⁹

But generalizations about national food habits can go just so far before they run aground on the rocks of class as well as regional differences. Not all Americans were stuck in the British culinary rut, neither were all the British. Moreover, by 1880, in both Britain and America, the old ways were being challenged by new ideas regarding how and what people should eat.