

# Introduction

Was it the shaking beef? Or the cellophane noodles with Dungeness crab? Perhaps the chicken in a clay pot? Which dish was most transcendent?

Charles Phan created these dishes for the Slanted Door, his signature fine-dining restaurant in San Francisco. Phan's family had escaped Vietnam on a cargo ship in 1975, just after the Fall of Saigon.<sup>1</sup> Today those cargo ships bring Vietnamese and other Asian foodstuffs in containers, but their early voyages across the Pacific in the late 1960s shipped supplies to American troops in Vietnam. Then, it was hard to imagine a war refugee winning awards for his California interpretation of Vietnamese food. When he first opened the Slanted Door in 1995, Phan himself wondered, "Are white people going to eat this? Will they pay me for this?"<sup>2</sup>

They did. Phan made it to the United States in 1977 as a teenager, settling with his family in San Francisco. After working as a busboy, in his family's clothing business, and in the computer industry, he pursued his love of food by opening the Slanted Door. In just a few years, the restaurant garnered a local and then a national following. By the late 1990s, it was among the most celebrated restaurants in San Francisco, serving Vietnamese cuisine in a fine-dining setting. In April of 2000, President Bill Clinton ate there just months before a diplomatic mission to Vietnam, the first sitting president of the United States to do so. While promoting his memoir a few years later, Clinton employed the restaurant to cater a gathering of Democratic Party hobnobbers.<sup>3</sup>

By then the restaurant had moved from the Mission District to the downtown waterfront; it was an anchor in each location, drawing other restaurateurs. At the downtown locale, its reservation staff fielded thousands of phone calls a day. In 2004 Phan won a prestigious James Beard award for "Best California Chef," and a

few years later *Gourmet* magazine named Slanted Door the best Vietnamese restaurant in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Phan's story illustrates a major shift in American eating habits over the last fifty years. In the mid-1960s the United States was fighting a war in Vietnam, but few Americans, save those GIs stationed abroad, had tried Vietnamese food. Rarer still would have been a Vietnamese restaurant anchoring a prime waterfront venue, as the Slanted Door now does for the Ferry Building in San Francisco. But in 2005 Charles Phan's spring rolls were photographed on the cover of *Food & Wine* with the headline, "Everyone loves Asian." The Slanted Door's popularity resulted from its exceptionally good food, but it was pathbreaking for a Vietnamese restaurant to charge high prices and win such critical acclaim.<sup>5</sup> It represented a vibrant example of the changes underway for many ethnic restaurants in this era. Ethnic cuisines once unfamiliar to American consumers moved from cheap dives to fancy emporiums as they slowly assimilated into the culture.<sup>6</sup>

Among its many other upheavals the Vietnam War engendered two simultaneous global changes: it ushered in a new way to ship goods more cheaply and efficiently over long distances, and it contributed to mass migration. Phan embodies these two phenomena of the last fifty years in the United States. Millions of immigrants entered the United States over that time, and a disproportionate number of them helped feed Americans, whether by picking strawberries, cooking meals, butchering cattle, or washing dishes. Sometimes those immigrants made "American" fare—hamburgers, hot dogs, and pizza. And sometimes they cooked a version of the recipes from their homeland; menudo, phở, chicken tikka, and pupusas.

### SAMENESS IN DIVERSITY

Food shows us the lived experience of globalization in the United States. Food reveals these developments because it is such an integral part of any society. Most Americans eat several times a day, with at least two or three significant "meals." Though we spend less of our budget and time preparing food than we ever have, food rituals are still important to most Americans' lives.<sup>7</sup> And eating is a communal activity, embedded with meaning. Sharing some sort of bread and wine is a ritual for most world cultures. The "bread" can take many forms—tortilla, baguette, rice, cassava, arepa. So too can the "wine"—zinfandel, beer, arrack, grappa, vodka—but the production and sharing of those things is important.<sup>8</sup> Social events usually involve food and drink. When visiting people's homes in almost all parts of the world, the guest is offered food or drink as a sign of hospitality.<sup>9</sup>

Food then can be a lens onto the way we understand culture as it changes over time. The choices we make about our foods, and the manner by which we understand those foods, are both meaningful. Paradoxically, because of immigration and globalization, our food choices have expanded dramatically at the same time

that just a few purveyors dominate many food sectors. This tension between sameness and diversity is “integral to globalization.”<sup>10</sup>

American food culture has transformed since the 1960s, with Americans eating out much more, getting fatter over time, and partaking of a much wider array of ethnic foods. Fast food became the norm, whether served by McDonald’s or Starbucks. And food fads, while always a part of American history, came and went even quicker during this era. Food journalism took off, with newspapers running food sections and magazines devoted just to food—think *Bon Appétit*, *Gourmet*, and *Saveur*. Food television, then blogs and eating Web sites, and then social media all slowly replaced newspapers and magazines, as citizens weighed in on their latest meals, cocktails, or barbecue outings via the internet. In particular, food scholars have in recent years highlighted Americans’ expanding waistlines and the latest media fancies over food.

Since the 1960s, the percentage of Americans classified as obese has almost tripled, increasing from about 13 percent of the adult population to about 36 percent.<sup>11</sup> The obesity epidemic has produced dramatically higher rates of type 2 diabetes and is implicated in a variety of other negative health outcomes, including heart disease and cancer. In 2001, the surgeon general estimated that “unhealthy dietary habits and sedentary behavior together account for approximately 300,000 deaths every year.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most surprising with this new epidemic is that it hits the poor hardest. Whereas for most of human history, the poor were underweight or malnourished, today they are *more* likely to be overweight or obese. How could this happen? The cheapest foods are often the most calorie dense—chips, crackers, soda, and other processed foods derived from tax-subsidized corn or soybeans. The poor binge on these foods because they are uncertain when the next meal may come, thus leading the body to store fat for later. Because racial minorities have higher rates of poverty, obesity and related diseases hit those populations more intensely. In a 2011–2014 survey, 42.5 percent of Hispanic adults and 48.1 percent of black adults were obese.<sup>13</sup>

Food media has a long history, with domestic science advice and recipe round-ups in newspapers and magazines in the 1800s and early 1900s. Later, food advice moved to radio, and then television. Betty Crocker, an invention of General Mills, made a mark in all three media with newspaper advice columns, a regular radio show, and then television. Even in the early years of television, food had a place, with cooking demonstrations on news programs and James Beard on a Friday night show after the boxing matches. Julia Child beamed into American homes on public television in the 1960s, and other chefs and celebrities followed.<sup>14</sup> The Food Network made its debut in 1993, harkening a new wave of food television programs.<sup>15</sup> In the internet era, anyone could access recipes and video cooking demonstrations in an instant. Social media introduced a new concept—documenting one’s eating habits via photos and video. This new media makes the diversity of the

world's foods more accessible. In this study, however, the timeline means I do not delve deeply into the social media age.

As Americans got fatter and social media gained traction, immigrants such as Charles Phan reordered America's ethnic and racial makeup. This shift has had dramatic consequences for American culture, social life, and politics. To some, this change has invoked fear—a new anti-immigrant backlash has slowly emerged since the 1970s. To others, it has provided opportunity, for immigrants form the economic backbone of many industries, including food. It has also presented Americans with a dizzying array of new cultural conveyances, whether in dress, music, language, or food.

American eating habits have changed dramatically since the 1960s because of immigration and globalization and a host of other social and economic upheavals. Globalization is the acceleration of trade and human migration. In times of global integration, such as the present era, people in faraway places are more connected by the goods and the arts they consume, the social relations they forge, and the work they wage. Americans discuss their computer glitches with call center employees in India; they can also eat an approximation of Indian food from restaurants and grocery stores in their hometowns.<sup>16</sup>

Globalization affects all parts of our lives, and it has long been important to the way Americans eat.<sup>17</sup> American supermarkets and restaurants brim with items not available in the 1960s—mangoes, hot sauces, açai drinks, kale smoothies, and coconut milk. As these choices have exploded in quantity, just a few conglomerates dominate many parts of the food industry, whether in chicken processing, beer manufacturing, or tortilla production. The changes in food reflect other phenomena. These include transportation and communication improvements, car culture and suburbanization, the diversification of the American population, and the increasing power of massive corporations. Using food, this book explains the globalization of American life and culture and the corresponding narrowing of big companies' control over it.

One way that Americans understood this shifting landscape was through food. Indeed, many experienced globalization for the first time and most intimately in grocery stores and restaurants. I examine the sites at which Americans bought food—grocery stores and restaurants—and the vehicles by which they understood their food choices—restaurant menus and cookbooks. This is a business history—one which examines the tortilla manufacturers, food wholesalers/sellers, and chefs to see how they source, prepare, and market foods. This is also a cultural history, or one that makes sense of how and why American consumers seek out and understand new foods and, at the same time, pursue convenience and comfort in their meals. This is the “omnivore's dilemma”—the paradox that we as humans are omnivores and therefore *can* eat anything. However, we don't, whether because we're afraid of poisoning, have been conditioned to eat certain foods by our cul-

ture and/or religion, or prefer the familiar. We are, on the one hand, incredibly adventurous in our eating habits, and on the other hand, very mundane. This dilemma has taken on new meaning in the past few decades because globalization presents more choices and yet more familiarity from place to place.<sup>18</sup>

Other scholars have examined some aspects of the introduction of ethnic foods over time and the process by which industrial giants appropriated and sold those foods. Most notably, Donna Gabaccia argued in *We Are What We Eat* that Americans have long welcomed foods from afar and have made hybrids as they appropriated those foods in an American context. Though there was a brief episode of cultural conservatism in the 1800s, she argues that Americans are culinary creoles who take on cuisine from many parts of the world and make it their own. This book updates Gabaccia's study by demonstrating the massive changes in American food over the last several decades, including the rise of suburban ethnic culture. It also uses the new concept of translating diversity to explain how Americans have understood all of the new foods available to them. And it contends that accelerating global trade and immigration since the 1960s has created a fundamental paradox in American food culture, that of sameness in diversity.<sup>19</sup>

The book explains this paradox, resulting from accelerating global trade and immigration since the 1960s, using four themes. First, it reveals how grocers, restaurateurs, and cookbook authors were leaders in marketing ethnic and foreign foods, as they translated diversity for an American audience. Food purveyors sought profit by selling new or "foreign" foods, but consumers frequently needed explanation or instruction to understand them. This is the first study to delve deeply into this process of cultural translation. Second, it demonstrates that cultural homogenization went beyond the McDonaldization variety—one in which American companies dominated abroad. Foreign companies, whether peddling tortillas or chicken tikka, came to dominate certain food sectors in the United States, and they often collaborated with massive American food firms. The process of introducing Americans to foreign foods often resulted in the homogenization of those cuisines in their American context, however. And food choices narrowed in some senses, as just a few firms dominated many food sectors. Third, it highlights globalization's effects on American suburbs, as strip malls and supermarkets became sites to experience foreign foods. Immigrants began to move directly to the suburbs, and these enclaves shifted from bastions of whiteness to hallmarks of diversity. Global exchanges were no longer centered only in big cities; instead, they occurred daily in the ethnic restaurants and grocery stores of the suburbs. Last, the book examines an increasing dialogue about authenticity in the United States, born out of a tension between homogenizing and diversifying culture. Americans sought "authentic" experiences more frequently because of the disorientation associated with globalization, but such experiences were fuzzy and fiercely contested.

IMMIGRATION AND GLOBALIZATION IN THE  
LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Since the 1960s, immigration has transformed the United States. The numbers are simply astounding. The United States was the largest destination for those immigrants, with some forty-six million foreign-born residents in 2015. In recent decades, over half of the world's migrants left Asia, with India producing the largest number of expatriates.<sup>20</sup>

In the several decades before the 1960s, immigration to the United States had been squelched. In 1924, the US Congress passed a law to severely restrict immigration, targeting those from eastern and southern European countries and Asians. This law, along with stricter border enforcement, came from a surge in racism in the 1910s and 1920s. Anti-immigrant groups gained traction in churches, women's groups, and the halls of Congress. The Ku Klux Klan counted millions of members in the 1920s, its largest total ever, with this wave of anti-immigrant sentiment. The law, and then depression and war in the 1930s and 1940s, dramatically reduced the number of people who immigrated to the United States.<sup>21</sup>

Riding the great wave of the civil rights cause, President Lyndon Johnson engineered passage of a revised immigration law in 1965. It opened the golden door to the United States again. Following the law's enactment, immigration surged, but this time not from Europe. Instead, over the next five decades, immigrants to the United States mostly came from Latin America and Asia.

From 1960 to 2010, the United States admitted over 34 million immigrants, resulting in what one commentator termed a "vast social experiment."<sup>22</sup> In 1970, only 4.7 percent of the American population was foreign-born (the lowest rate in almost two centuries). By 2010, 40 million people, or 12.9 percent of the population, had been born abroad.<sup>23</sup> The racial and ethnic makeup of the country changed dramatically as a result. Whereas in 1970, 1.5 million people identified themselves as Asian on the census, by 2010 that total had surged to 14.7 million. Similarly, in 1970 there were 9.6 million Hispanics in the United States, and by 2010 that number exceeded 50.5 million. The 2010 Hispanic population included 31.8 million Mexican Americans. Table 1 shows this dramatic shift.<sup>24</sup>

In the last half-century then, immigration from Latin America and Asia has replaced that from Europe. From 1820 to 1969, 79.9 percent of immigrants to the United States came from Europe. Between 1981 and 2000, only 12.3 percent were from the European continent.<sup>25</sup>

As immigration surged, so too did global trade. Americans are connected to the world via the goods they possess—the mobile phones, T-shirts, automobiles, or fruit from abroad. As immigrants moved by the millions into the United States, they sought out the foods of their homeland. In any community with a large population of one immigrant group, entrepreneurs figured out that it could

TABLE 1 The Changing US Population, 1970–2010

	1970	2010
% Foreign-born	4.7	12.9
Asian population	1.5 mil.	14.7 mil.
Hispanic population	9.6 mil.	50.5 mil.
Total population	203.2 mil.	308.7 mil.

SOURCES: William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics are Remaking America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 67, 89; US Census Bureau, “A Look at the 1940 Census,” [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/cspan/1940census/CSPAN\\_1940slides.pdf](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/cspan/1940census/CSPAN_1940slides.pdf) (accessed January 22, 2017).

be good business to import foods from afar, knowing it would cure the homesickness many felt. It wasn't just homesickness that drove immigrant consumption of foods. Habit dictated this too. Certain foods are intimately tied to certain cuisines, making them hard to let go. Think about tortillas for Mexicans, fish sauce for Vietnamese, or olive oil for Italians. Second-generation Americans tell of their immigrant parents clinging to these foods no matter what they eat—pouring fish sauce on fries and burgers or adding tortillas to any meal, no matter the cuisine.<sup>26</sup>

One such Texas entrepreneur was typical of this process. In 1981 he started an Indian grocery store in Houston but soon heard from customers that no such store existed in Dallas. Seeing an opportunity, he moved to Dallas in 1983 and immediately searched the telephone book for areas with Indian surnames. He saw that the Beltline area in the northern suburbs had many Indian immigrants, so he opened his store there. After a tough first year he found success, expanding the store and adding a fast food counter at the back. By the late 1980s his store anchored a shopping center where eight other Indian-owned businesses flourished. He estimated that he had three to four thousand regular customers, including some from Arkansas and Oklahoma. He went to India three times a year to expand his product line and had employees regularly pick up air shipments in Dallas for delivery to local restaurants.<sup>27</sup> While these stores flourished in many places, immigrant customers slowly assimilated and bought fewer of these imported goods from their brethren—in part because managers at major supermarket chains saw that selling immigrant foods could be profitable too.

The success of those immigrant entrepreneurs and large grocers in selling immigrant foods also required communications and trade improvements. Telegraphs, telephones, faxes, computers, mobile phones, and jet planes have all made it possible for merchants to communicate globally. A three-minute telephone call between New York and London fell from \$60.42 to \$0.40 between 1960 and 2000.<sup>28</sup>

These technological changes make it possible to transact a much wider variety of goods, but they also introduced a sameness over time and space. Workers video conferencing from New York to Shanghai might drink the same Starbucks latte even as their environs differ greatly.

Firms had to move goods more efficiently too. Containerized shipping and air travel made this possible. Falling transportation costs have been key to globalization over the past century. Ocean freight costs fell 70 percent between 1920 and 1990.<sup>29</sup> Since the 1960s, goods have crossed oceans in standardized train boxcars (or truck trailers). Containers can be lifted directly off a train or truck, stacked onto a ship, and ferried across the ocean to a foreign port, there to be crane-lifted again to another train or truck. Today, about 70 percent of all worldwide freight moves by container ship.<sup>30</sup>

As noted by other scholars, globalization can thus create “heterogeneity as well as homogeneity” with local shifts moving national, transnational, and global change.<sup>31</sup> If the United States has had an imperial or hegemonic presence throughout the world since World War II, the cultural dialogue about American power typically centers on the impact of hamburgers, blue jeans, and American movies abroad. Cultural commentators wonder how these American artifacts are adopted, adapted, or rejected around the world. They often focus on the big corporations, which can extend their logistical and marketing budgets widely; McDonald’s and Coca Cola loom large in this food imperium. Whether America sought or even created an empire is still heavily debated, but there is no doubt that these snippets of American culture are felt abroad.<sup>32</sup>

Since the 1960s, however, this hasn’t just been a one-way street of American beef and soda filling up foreigners. Multinational corporations, such as Gruma and JBS, based in Mexico and Brazil, have had their share in satiating the American belly as well. I show how America’s daily bread, meat, and fruits are frequently controlled by foreign firms that operate on a massive scale.

Globalization has accelerated in dramatic fashion since the 1960s. The rapid change has been much greater than any previous globalizing era, including from 1870 to 1913. In that earlier period, the United States dove headlong into the global economy and immigration surged dramatically too. Migrants moved far away for work, sharing commodities and culture across national and regional boundaries. Barriers to trade significantly declined, as “international freight rates collapsed” because of new technologies, including steamships, railroads, and canals. This “transport revolution” had an impact worldwide, whether in rich or poor regions. Many governments also opened anew to trade, lifting long-held barriers. Japan is one case in point; it had been relatively closed to trade until 1858, when it suddenly opened to the world’s ships.<sup>33</sup> Following World War I, however, global trade declined as governments put up tariffs and worldwide depression and another global war strained international cooperation.



In terms of raw figures, global trade since the 1960s is double that of the 1870–1913 period. Trade comprised 29 percent of world GDP in 1913. It then declined precipitously between the 1910s and the 1940s. In 1972, world trade as a percentage of GDP surpassed 29 percent for the first time in the postwar period, accelerating to 59 percent by 2009.<sup>34</sup> The United States was among the top exporters and importers of goods and services throughout this period. In the past two decades, China and India have trafficked a larger portion of worldwide trade as their economies have surged.<sup>35</sup>

These figures fail to capture the actual lived experience of globalization, however. In both periods, natives and immigrants were astounded by the incredible changes they witnessed. In 1900, the Chicago slaughterhouses teemed with immigrants from all over Europe. They sought lunchtime respite from the abattoir's hurly burly in the saloons surrounding their workplace and residences. In *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair describes this milieu of Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, and others competing for a small wage, a small place to rest after work, and a small bit of dignity.<sup>36</sup> A hundred years later the slaughterhouses had moved from Chicago to rural areas south and west, but Chicago still teems with immigrant workers. They converge on downtown and suburban office parks every day, driving taxis, bussing tables, writing computer code, and brokering international business deals. Many more come from Latin America and Asia, and a large number do not toil at the lowest rung of the labor ladder.

A look at the meatpacking industry in 1900 and 2000 puts the two eras in perspective. In 1900, the large meatpackers in Chicago—Swift, Armour, Morris—got their raw materials (cattle and hogs) from the West, processed most everything in Chicago, and then sent it out to customers in the United States and Europe.<sup>37</sup> In our own era, this is a cross-border enterprise mostly away from Chicago. Piglets born on Canadian farms get shipped to the midwestern United States for fattening and slaughter. The pork cutlets are shipped back to Canada (or to Mexico) for consumption. Similarly, some cattle are weaned in Chihuahua, Mexico, only to grow up in the American Midwest. They're subsequently processed, with much of the beef sold in Mexican Walmarts.<sup>38</sup> The trade is still global, but the routes and connections for that trade are far different today.

Sociologists have examined the many paradoxes of globalization, including that of sameness in diversity in food choices. Their studies identify the growing push for free trade across borders, often at the expense of the poor. In these studies, multinational corporations loom large, pushing governments to enact trade and subsidy policies to benefit their bottom line. One debate among these scholars is the degree to which local foods compete with the multinationals to fill bellies. Some studies, however, portray this as an all-or-nothing proposition. Either local foods must die at the hands of McDonald's or Wal-Mart, or they can only flourish if the "pathologies" of globalized agriculture are eliminated.<sup>39</sup> In reality, consumers

in the United States and elsewhere straddle a middle ground, in which “homogenization and heterogenization are both crucial features of modern life.”<sup>40</sup> Local foods and imported foods sit side-by-side on store shelves, just as consumers may choose to eat a staid diet or experiment regularly with new, ethnic, or foreign foods.

This debate also turns to the question of “traditional” foods, sometimes conflating them with local foods. Tradition, of course, is invented, and changes are birthed in every era, including the present. However, the fact that recent globalization has compressed time and space causes many to wonder whether it obliterates tradition.<sup>41</sup> It does and it doesn’t. Tradition is constantly reshaped, and fast food can be a tradition in many families. To start, *tradition* is a loaded word that can mean very different things. If you just mean what you “normally” do, that need not be loaded up with visions of mom’s home cooking. Mom may have hated to cook, and tradition might have meant a quick stop at the drive-thru or TV dinners. Furthermore, “tradition” (or doing things the old way), might happen only on select occasions, such as Sunday dinner or holidays. Many families do whatever they can on the weekdays to just eat but may spend more time on the weekend doing something special because they have the time. This could mean regularly visiting grandma’s house for Sunday lunch or special meals with friends on Saturday. So, there is a mix in many families of the standardized fast-food burrito on one night and the home-cooked meal from one’s ethnic traditions for another night. Tradition is changing, can (and usually does) involve those multinational corporations, and includes both homogenized and heterogeneous foods.

There is also a question of who benefits from free trade and globalization. The answer is not simple. Consumers see prices decrease slightly. Workers see wages drop in many places. Urbanization accelerates as small farmers are displaced by large agricultural firms. Choices increase in some sense, but that can be an illusion when large firms provide most of those options. The poor may see marginally increased job opportunities in some areas. But some may feel compelled to leave their old way of life for the new—work at a factory or in a city when generations lived in the country. Increased trade has also meant a move away from self-sustaining agriculture. In many poor parts of the world farmers grew crops for their own sustenance and, if they had a good year, to sell the surplus. This was frequently precarious. Nature’s whims often bankrupted or starved farmers. With free trade, farmers turn to commodity crops to be sold to the market. This means they also rely on imported goods for sustenance, making them vulnerable to a second master—the market. Those imported goods can change diets, such as when soybean oil or wheat are exported to markets where they were not staples before. Again, this is not entirely new. In the 1800s American farmers, merchants, and bankers were intimately tied to the world cotton market and relied on many imported goods as urbanization took hold.<sup>42</sup>

## DIVERSE PEOPLE AND FOODS IN THE SUBURBS

People seeking out the latest food trends and ethnic cuisines used to have dinner out downtown. But as Americans and new immigrants moved in droves to the suburbs, so too did ethnic food. For the best Chinese food, Chinatown was no longer the only option. Indian and Mexican food abounded in the suburbs of D.C., Chicago, and other metropolitan areas where, in some cases, chefs crafted the most innovative cuisine. The suburbs also hosted the homogenized version of ethnic foods, most notably with the Chinese chains of P.F. Chang's and Panda Express, comfortably filling a niche within the mid-range and cheap Chinese food offerings. The changes in ethnic foods reflect the new geography of consumption in the United States, in which the suburbs were at the center of globalization. Immigrants moved directly to the suburbs of major urban areas, no longer having to settle in the segregated ethnic enclaves of old. Food studies has long had an urban/rural bias, in which the focus is on the downtown restaurant or the farm supplying that restaurant.<sup>43</sup> In the last half-century, however, suburbs have exploded in the United States and abroad.

After the 1960s, suburbanization and globalization each increased and intensified. The number of Americans living in suburbs doubled from 1950 to 2000, growing from about a quarter to half the population.<sup>44</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, suburban life was the norm, and the suburban home became the "quintessential mass consumer commodity,"<sup>45</sup> making "suburban culture a consuming culture."<sup>46</sup> It was also a symbol of sameness and mass production. Assembly-line construction techniques widened the province of homeownership beginning in the 1940s. The mass-produced home was cheap to build and cheap to own.<sup>47</sup> Mass production meant the homes from subdivision to subdivision, cul-de sac to cul-de sac, came to "all look the same."<sup>48</sup>

But underneath the superficial sameness hid great diversity. For one, the racial makeup of the suburbs ceased to be predominately white after the 1980s. Hispanics, Asians, and the foreign-born moved into the suburbs in great numbers.<sup>49</sup> People of all races and ethnicities put their individualistic flourishes on the sameness of the suburbs. Even Levittown, New York, the old model for mass-produced suburbia, was no longer a whites-only enclave by the early twenty-first century.<sup>50</sup>

## DIVERSITY

Increased global trade brought many more choices to American tables, but it was another matter for consumers to understand and utilize the new fruits (papayas), vegetables (nopales), sauces (tikka masala), and grains (quinoa) on store shelves. Cookbooks, restaurant menus, food advertisements, food television, and social media were among the media in which foreign foods were made comprehensible to an American audience.<sup>51</sup>

That “American” audience should be clarified here. In essence, it means the masses. The population of the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s was as assimilated into a homogenized “American” culture as it has ever been. The foreign-born population was at an all-time low, and though there had been massive immigration from Europe in the early twentieth century, those immigrants were outnumbered by their second- and third-generation descendants. Together, whites and blacks made up about 95 percent of the US population, with Hispanics and Asians constituting only 5 percent.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, most consumers of Mexican, Indian, or Vietnamese food often needed help in understanding those cuisines. They needed translators or guides to make seemingly strange food understandable.

Cultural translators—grocers, advertisers, cookbook authors, and restaurateurs—played a pivotal role in familiarizing the American public with new foods. Translation changed over time, for the foods Americans were familiar with changed too. For example, a very small percentage of Americans had tried Indian food in the 1960s. Then, the more familiar British Empire was used to translate the “curries” that seemed more slop than sauce to many Americans. Indeed, many Indian restaurants in the United States were run by British ex-pats who had spent time in the old empire. Slowly, as more Indian immigrants moved to the United States, they shed the British legacy and reclaimed an older empire—the Mughal one. The Mughals brought grilled meats and flat breads to India; these were foods Americans could easily interpret, so Indian restaurateurs featured them on their menus next to the curries. But over time, Indian immigrants came from a wider expanse of India, and by the 1990s they re-created the subcontinent’s diverse cuisines. Their efforts met with some success because many Americans had become familiar with other spicy cuisines—Mexican and Thai, for example. The translation process was ever changing, adapting to the shifting culture.

That food culture shifted in the 1960s and 1970s when purveyors targeted “gourmet” and counterculture eaters with ethnic foods. This selling of ethnicity was not confined to food, however. Airlines, fashion mavens, music sellers, and others sought out customers who were sophisticated, had traveled abroad, and weren’t afraid of the foreign, argued Ernest Dichter, one of the leading marketing experts of the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> Dichter saw that tastes were changing rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s as more Americans traveled abroad, sought variety in foods, and wanted to try entirely new combinations of foods.<sup>54</sup> These included ethnic or foreign foods.

Dichter and others realized that they could broaden their marketing possibilities by using ethnicity to sell foods.<sup>55</sup> Supermarket and restaurant chains used ethnic foods to capture business from immigrants and their descendants and as a way to entice all customers to try new foods. *Ethnic food* is a term that changes over time, but I define it here as any food that is not considered “American.” It is instead associated with another ethnic group—say Chinese or Italian. Although “there is

no clear cut universally accepted definition,” it is “identified in the public mind with a foreign source or an American minority group.”<sup>56</sup>

The term is transient and specific to the American context. The hamburger (named after Hamburg, Germany) was brought by German immigrants to the United States in the 1800s but is now indelibly associated with the United States. Today, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who called a hamburger an “ethnic food” in any part of America.<sup>57</sup> For many years, “Chinese” food in America was really Cantonese food, for it didn’t encompass a broad spectrum of foods in China.<sup>58</sup> The term can create controversy because of its malleability. Journalist Gustavo Arellano once said, “Here’s what I know. If it’s in a tortilla, it’s Mexican food. If it’s made by a Mexican, it’s Mexican food.”<sup>59</sup> He’s of course ignoring the fact that some Mexican food doesn’t contain tortillas (though not much) and non-Mexicans can make Mexican food. A better and simpler test for whether something is an ethnic food in any historical period is to basically ask if most Americans called it that. In times of rapid globalization, the “other” changes over time and ethnic character can migrate. This was the case for the hamburger as it moved from Germany to America, for “each regional and national cuisine is a culinary hybrid.”<sup>60</sup> Ethnic foods hybridized because they fit within a major strategy of modern American business—product differentiation, or getting consumers to buy the newest thing.<sup>61</sup>

Food marketing was but one part of the larger trend toward market segmentation in American business. As the supermarket industry discovered that there really was no “typical shopper,” it segmented consumers based on various elements, including race, ethnicity, income, and education.<sup>62</sup> Because mass marketing had prevailed from the 1930s to the 1960s, the transition to segmented marketing took time. Grocery stores, food processors, and restaurant chains progressively moved to target smaller subsets of the buying public and used a broader range of products to do so. In the 1970s, grocery chains focused on capturing the “black shopper,” even as they realized there might not be a precise formula for targeting her. Over time they developed strategies to sell to Hispanic and Asian shoppers while also attempting to sell the same products to a broader public. By using new technologies, such as computer-aided supply chain management, businesses were later able to target even smaller segments, such as upper-class immigrants from Hong Kong.

#### SAMENESS

Though the grocery aisles were exploding with choices after the 1960s, another trend flew in the face of all this—the homogenization and consolidation of the food industry. Big food companies got bigger over time by buying up rivals, using their political influence and taking advantage of economies of scale. Although it

seemed dozens of companies operated in the bread aisle of the typical supermarket, only a few firms actually controlled that section.

A handful of grocers dominate their industry. In my home state of Colorado, Kroger, Walmart, and Safeway together take 76 percent of grocery sales.<sup>63</sup> One estimate has Walmart selling more than half of all groceries in the United States.<sup>64</sup> We live in an age of oligopoly, as demonstrated by the food industry.

The largest food processors have enormous financial power. The top ten global food companies pull in \$1.1 billion in revenue per day. Nestlé, the biggest food firm in the world, had revenues larger than either the nation of Guatemala or Yemen in 2010.<sup>65</sup> Mergers and buyouts produce mega-firms that extend to what we often believe is local or small-scale production. This is true even in the organic industry—a fact that probably surprises many Whole Foods customers. The giant food companies have bought dozens of organic and natural foods brands since the 1990s, including Odwalla (owned by Coca-Cola), Kashi (Kellogg), Cascadian Farms (General Mills), and Applegate Farms (Hormel).<sup>66</sup> Yet another example is the flour industry; most of our bread is milled, baked, distributed, marketed, and sold by just a few companies.<sup>67</sup> Just two companies sell most of the beer in the world.<sup>68</sup> Anheuser-Busch InBev and SABMiller are the giants controlling 71 percent of sales.<sup>69</sup> And just a few processors control the meat industry; four firms produce 65 percent of the nation's pork and 85 percent of the beef. Three firms process almost half of the chicken in the country. Dominance by just a few companies caused meat prices to increase over the past decade.<sup>70</sup>

The food business isn't the only sector dominated by just a few firms. Between 2005 and 2015, the nine major airlines in the United States merged to become just four—United, Delta, American, and Southwest. They control 80 percent of the domestic travel market.<sup>71</sup> One survey found Amazon selling a full 41 percent of books in the United States (print and e-book) and 67 percent of e-books.<sup>72</sup> Three companies—Sony, Universal, and Warner—rule the music industry.<sup>73</sup> Intel held 85 percent of the global market for PC microprocessors.<sup>74</sup>

What should we make of this? Big firms control many of the products we buy. In many cases they drive away or swallow small firms, hold great sway with governments to reduce regulations and taxes, and give an illusion of choice. Most wield massive advertising budgets to persuade us that they have our best interests at heart, even when they don't. And at worst, they are close to monopolies, or at least oligopolies, thereby driving up prices, reducing quality, and peddling foods stripped of nutritional value.<sup>75</sup> There is also a paradox here, however. Even as big firms control sectors, one-stop shops—ethnic grocery stores, mom and pop restaurants, and food trucks still flourish. The big firms get a good portion of our wallets but only so much. Those firms frequently capitalize on the success of the smallholders though.

## THE AUTHENTICITY TRAP

The wide availability of foreign foods and the constantly changing food environment raises questions of authenticity when it comes to food. Globalization-disoriented geography and the flattening nature of fast food caused many consumers to search for something real. They often wondered how “Americanized” foods were in their local context, whether at a restaurant or grocery store. This raises all manner of questions about how we perceive culture, especially with respect to race and ethnicity. Must sushi restaurants have Asian-looking hosts and chefs to feel authentic? What decor is expected in an Indian or Mexican restaurant? If food in Japan, Mexico, and India is rapidly changing too, what is really authentic? Consumers—both immigrant and native—sought certain ingredients from afar to make the real taco, bowl of phở, or curry. Paradoxically, however, they also sought local foods. For some, “real” meant a chicken taco from a bird raised behind the restaurant, garnished with radishes and cilantro from a local purveyor. Restaurants simultaneously celebrated the foreign and local origins of their offerings, reflecting the inherent tension for consumers in globalization. Non-food businesses fed this desire too, claiming authenticity for all sorts of other consumer products—travel, furniture, clothing, and music are just a few examples.

Though authenticity was highly contested, it was also something of a shell game. After all, food cultures in Mexico and India are constantly changing, so trying to find the supposedly “authentic” Indian or Mexican food in a strip mall in Seattle might be a lost cause. The authentic or the phony—take your pick—was cultivated by an army of worker-bee immigrants in the fields, slaughterhouses, restaurants, cafés, and grocery stores of American cities and suburbs. When it came to food, the parade of the authentic was evident in the immigrants who picked fruits, butchered meat, cooked, washed dishes, and bused tables. In many cities, no matter the cuisine, it was cooked by recent immigrants.<sup>76</sup>

One study found that in the city of Chicago in 2000, more Mexican men worked as cooks than in any other occupation, including construction and gardening.<sup>77</sup> Many of them were not necessarily making Mexican food, but instead threw pizzas, rolled sushi, and chopped ginger, indicating that the authentic was again a slippery notion. And while it may have been necessary at one time for a sushi bar to have a Japanese-looking person behind the counter, it was slowly becoming acceptable to have Mexican American chefs, or “susheros,” crafting tuna rolls at many spots. Roberto Pina was one such chef at Midori, a sushi restaurant in Chicago owned by Korean Americans. Most of Pina’s coworkers were Mexican immigrants too. When he began working there in 1990, many Asian customers saw him and immediately walked out of the restaurant. He said those customers “accepted” him over time, however.<sup>78</sup> While Pina basically makes sushi in the standard Japanese American style, he has added some Mexican aspects to his creations,