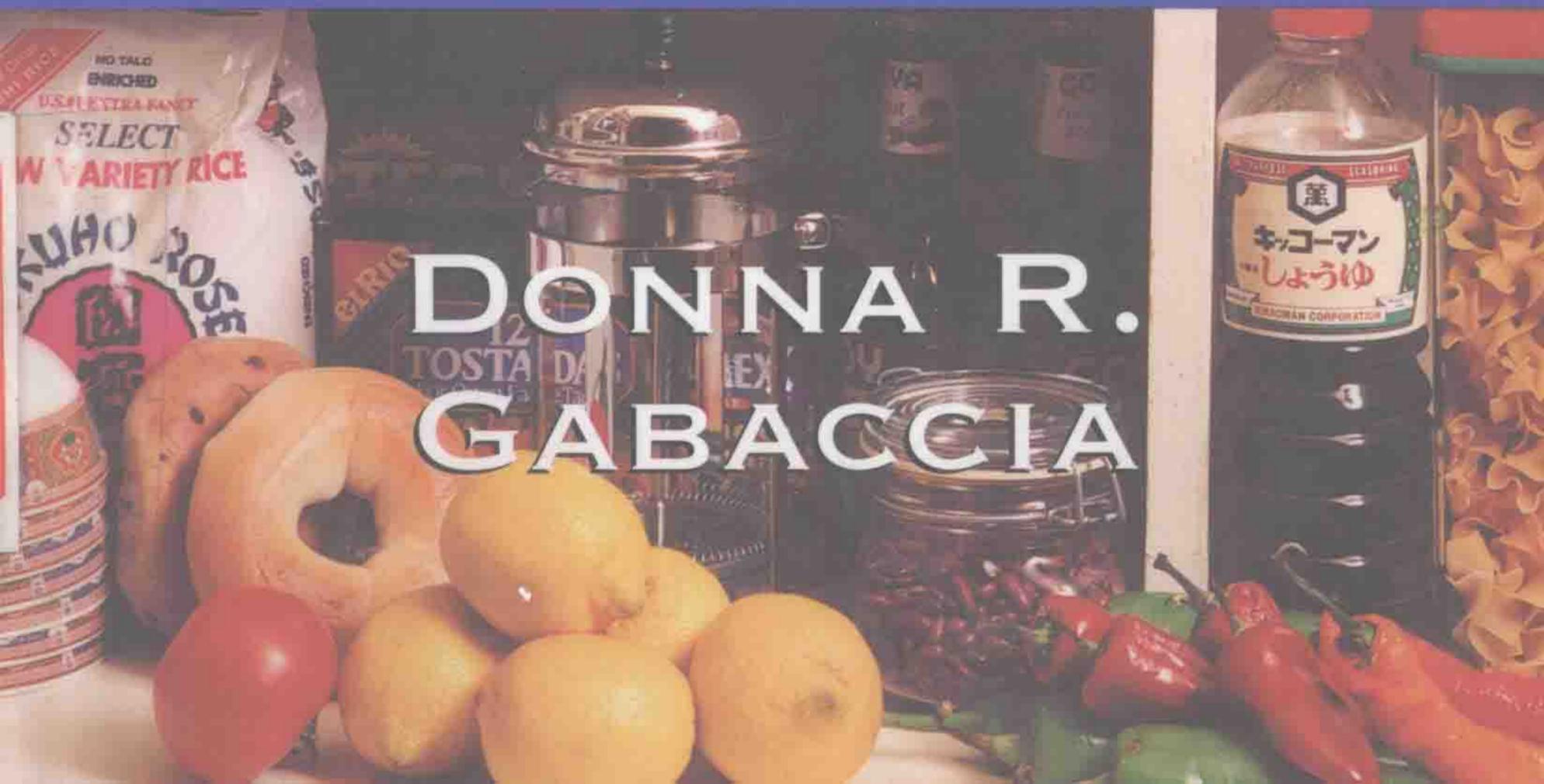




WE ARE WHAT WE EAT



❧ Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans ❧



DONNA R.
GABACCIA

We Are

What We Eat

*Ethnic Food and the
Making of Americans*

Donna R. Gabaccia

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Mangiando, ricordo:
Dedicated to Tamino,
my German-speaking,
Italo-Polish-American child,
who eats Ethiopian and cooks Cuban
and who grew up with this book

The Mexican Sangwitch

Is it a tortilla with peanut butter and jelly,
or jalapeños piled on Wonder Bread?
Is it a coney made with tortillas,
or a Kaiser roll smothered
with salchiches y salsa mayonesa?
Is it chorizo con huevo on whole wheat,
or refried beans on white bread?
Is it the patron saint of botanas,
or a Mexican who can only speak English?
Is it the same as an American Taco?
Is it a Mexican playing tic-tac-toe?
Is it carne asada on rye,
or guacamole on toast?
Do you really want to know why?
Is it me inside of you,
or you wrapped around me?
Is it a güera dancing with two Mexicans,
or two gringos putting the make on my sister?
Is it a super sandwich, with the official
ingredients labeled: HECHO EN MEXICO!
Is it a plain sandwich
made by authentic Mexican hands?
Is it true Juan de la Raza invented it?
Is it a moot question?
Are you a lawyer or a poet?
Does the judge really care?

Detroit 7/1990

Trinidad Sánchez, Jr., "Why Am I So Brown?" from the book of the same title, copyright 1991. Reprinted by permission of MARCH Abrazo Press, Chicago, Illinois.

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INTRODUCTION

What Do We Eat?

In 1989, hungry Houstonians learned they could buy “New York deli” without leaving town—at the newly opened Guggenheim’s Delicatessen. The restaurateur offering bagels, rugelach, herring, corned beef, and cheese cake at Guggenheim’s was Ghulam Bombaywala, an immigrant from Pakistan. Bombaywala had already worked for years in a Houston steakhouse and a local Italian restaurant and had also operated a small chain of Mexican restaurants. Before opening Guggenheim’s, Bombaywala went to New York to do his own research, eating in different delis three meals a day for five days. Back in Houston, Bombaywala sought partners, and he borrowed the recipes for Guggenheim’s from one of them, a Mrs. Katz.¹ Bombaywala did not seem to know that Germans, not Eastern European Jews, had opened New York’s first delicatessens. And needless to say, most Houstonians devouring Guggenheim’s New York deli were neither Germans, Eastern Europeans, Jews, nor New Yorkers. But then neither was Bombaywala.

The same year, three transplanted easterners with suspiciously Italian-sounding names—Paul Sorrentino, Rob Geresi, and Vince Vrana—opened their own New York Bagel Shop and Delicatessen in Oklahoma. Bagels packaged by Lender’s had been available for years in local frozen food compartments, as were advertisements offering recipes for “pizzels,” made of frozen bagels topped with canned tomato sauce. As business-

men looking for a market niche, Sorrentino, Geresi, and Vrana wagered that the most knowledgeable and sophisticated of Oklahoman consumers would enjoy freshly baked “New-York-style” bagels, which were chewier than their frozen counterparts. Like many retailers in the South and West, however, their New York Bagel Shop and Delicatessen offered bagels with sandwich fillings—everything from cream cheese to “California-style” avocado and sprouts.²

Meanwhile, in far-off Jerusalem, a New Yorker, Gary Heller, concluded that Israelis too could appreciate bagels, given an opportunity. Importing frozen dough from Manhattan’s Upper West Side H & H Bagels (begun in 1972 by the brothers-in-law Helmer Toro and Hector Hernandez), Heller did the final baking of his bagels in Israel. He quickly acquired orders from a national supermarket chain and from Dunkin’ Donuts, which was about to open its first Tel Aviv franchise. After a long journey from Eastern European bakeries through the multi-ethnic delis of New York and the factories of a modern food industry, the bagel had arrived in the new Jewish homeland.

Heller knew that Americans transplanted to Israel would buy his bagels, but to make a profit, he had to sell 160,000 of them to native consumers, in competition with a local brand under license from Lender’s Bagels. As Heller noted, Jews born in Israel (*sabras*) “think bagels are American, not Jewish.” Israelis knew “bagele”—the closest local products—only as hard, salt-covered rounds, unlike Heller’s product, or as soft sesame ellipses. And these, ironically, were baked and sold by Arabs.³

A grumpy cultural observer pauses at this point, well-armed for a diatribe on the annoying confusions of postmodern identities in the 1990s. It is easy to harrumph, as Octavio Paz once did, that “the melting pot is a social ideal that, when applied to culinary art, produces abominations”—bagel pizzas and bagels topped with avocado and sprouts surely qualify.⁴ Paz would find a typical American’s eating day an equally abominable multi-ethnic smorgasbord. The menu might include a bagel, cream cheese, and cappuccino at breakfast; a soft drink with hamburger and corn chips, or pizza and Greek salad, at lunch; and meat loaf, stir-fried “vegetables orientale” (from the frozen foods section of the supermarket), and apple pie for dinner. Wasn’t eating better when delicatessens served sausages to Germans, when Bubbie purchased bagels at a kosher bakery, and when only

her Jewish children and grandchildren ate them, uncorrupted by Philadelphia cream cheese? When Houston savored chili from “Tex-Mex” vendors? When only Oklahomans ate their beef and barbecue? And when neither pizza, tacos, nor bagels came from corporate “huts” or “bells,” let alone a Dunkin’ Donuts in Tel Aviv?

As a historian of American eating habits, I must quickly answer any potentially grumpy critics with a resounding no. The American penchant to experiment with foods, to combine and mix the foods of many cultural traditions into blended gumbos or stews, and to create “smorgasbords” is scarcely new but is rather a recurring theme in our history as eaters.

Consider, for example, the earlier history of the bagel. It is true that in the 1890s in the United States only Jews from Eastern Europe ate bagels. In thousands of nondescript bakeries—including the one founded in New Haven around 1926 by Harry Lender from Lublin, Poland—Jewish bakers sold bagels to Jewish consumers. The bagel was not a central culinary icon for Jewish immigrants; even before Polish and Russian Jews left their ethnic enclaves or ghettos, their memories exalted gefilte fish and chicken soup prepared by their mothers, but not the humble, hard rolls purchased from the immigrant baker. As eaters, Jewish immigrants were initially far more concerned with the purity of their kosher meat, their challah, and their matzos, and with the satisfactions of their sabbath and holiday meals, than with their morning hard roll. They and their children seemed more interested in learning to use Crisco or eat egg rolls and chicken chow mein than in affirming the bagel as a symbol of Jewish life or as a contribution to American cuisine.

Still, the bagel did become an icon of urban, northeastern eating, a key ingredient of the multi-ethnic mix that in this century became known as “New York deli.” The immigrant neighbors of Eastern European Jewish bakers were among the first to discover the bagel and to begin its transformation from a Jewish specialty into an American food. Unconvinced by the turn-of-the-century arguments of home economists that Americanization required them to adopt recipes for codfish and other New-England-inspired delicacies, consumers from many backgrounds began instead to sample culinary treats, like the bagel, for sale in their own multi-ethnic home cities. In New Haven, by the mid-1940s, for example, the Lenders’ bakery employed six family workers, including Harry’s sons Murray and Markin,

who still lived at home behind the store. Hand-rolling bagels and boiling them before baking, two workers could produce about 120 bagels an hour, enough to allow the Lenders to meet expanding demand from their curious Italian, Irish, and Russian neighbors. The Lenders soon produced 200 dozen bagels daily.

No one knows who first slathered bagels with cream cheese—a product introduced and developed by English Quakers in their settlements in the Delaware Valley and Philadelphia in the eighteenth century. The blend of old and new, however, proved popular with a wide range of American consumers. With a firm grasp on regional marketing, Harry Lender's sons reorganized the family business in 1962 and decided to seek a national market. They purchased new machines that could produce 400 bagels an hour. The machines eliminated hand-rolling and substituted steaming for boiling. Flash-freezing and packaging in plastic bags for distribution to supermarkets around the country soon followed.

When union bagel bakers protested the introduction of the new machines, bagel manufacturers responded by moving production outside the Northeast. Along with the manufacturers of “Jewish” rye bread and other products common to deli display cases, the Lenders had learned “You don't have to be Jewish” to purchase and enjoy Jewish foods. With mass production for a mass market, they learned “You don't have to be Jewish” to produce them, either. In the late 1970s, Lender's was still family-owned and managed, but it employed 300 nonunionized and mainly non-Jewish workers.

In 1984 Kraft purchased Lender's as a corporate companion for its Philadelphia brand cream cheese. All over the country, consumers could now buy a totally standardized, mass-produced bagel under the Lender's label. A bagel, complained Nach Waxman, owner of a New York cookbook store, with “no crust, no character, no nothing.”⁵ This was a softer bagel, and—like most American breads—sweetened with sugar. Following in the tradition of the long-popular breakfast muffin, bagels emerged from factories in a variety of flavors associated with desserts and breakfast cereals—honey, raisin, blueberry, cinnamon.⁶ Sun-dried tomato bagels followed in the 1990s, along with other popular flavors inspired by Mediterranean cuisines. Broney Gadman, a Long Island manufacturer of bagel-steaming equipment, believed that American consumers wanted a bland bagel.

They were “used to hamburger rolls, hot-dog buns and white bread,” he explained. “They prefer a less crusty, less chewy, less tough product—You needed good teeth” to eat hand-rolled and boiled bagels.⁷

Waxman and Gadman made a sharp distinction between mass-produced factory bagels (or cinnamon and sun-dried-tomato bagels) and “the real thing.” They preferred authenticity, as defined by their memories of bagels in the Jewish ghettos of the past. As millions of Americans with no bagel eaters in their family trees snapped up Kraft’s Lender’s brand, and as sabras came to appreciate American bagels at Dunkin’ Donuts in Tel Aviv, Bubbie’s descendants, along with a multi-ethnic crowd of well-educated Americans fascinated with traditional ethnic foods, searched elsewhere for their culinary roots and a chewier bagel.

Some of them found authenticity with Bombaywala’s renditions of Mrs. Katz’s recipes. Others discovered they could buy “real” bagels again from the Lenders. For Murray and Markin Lender chose not to follow their family brand into employment with corporate Kraft. Instead, they opened a suburban restaurant that offered, among other things, a bagel of crust and character, ideal for Nach Waxman. A host of small businessmen like Bombaywala and the Lender brothers revived hand-rolling and boiling, sometimes in full view of their customers.

The history of the bagel suggests that Americans’ shifting, blended, multi-ethnic eating habits are signs neither of postmodern decadence, ethnic fragmentation, nor corporate hegemony. If we do not understand how a bagel could sometimes be Jewish, sometimes be “New York,” and sometimes be American, or why it is that Pakistanis now sell bagels to both Anglos and Tejanos in Houston, it is in part because we have too hastily assumed that our tendency to cross cultural boundaries in order to eat ethnic foods is a recent development—and a culinary symptom of all that has gone wrong with contemporary culture.

It is not. The bagel tells a different kind of American tale. It highlights ways that the production, exchange, marketing, and consumption of food have generated new identities—for foods and eaters alike. Looking at bagels in this light, we see that they became firmly identified as “Jewish” only as Jewish bakers began selling them to their multi-ethnic urban neighbors. When bagels emerged from ghetto stores as a Jewish novelty, bagels with cream cheese quickly became a staple of the cuisine

known as “New York deli,” and was marketed and mass-produced throughout the country under this new regional identity. When international trade brought bagels to Israel, they acquired a third identity as “American.” And finally, coming full circle, so to speak, the bagel’s Americanization sent purists off in search of bagels that seemed more authentically “New York Jewish.”

If the identity of bagels emerged from an evolving marketplace, can we say the same of bagel eaters’ identities? What, after all, does “what we eat” tell us about “who we are”? Again, too easily, we assume a recent, sharp departure into culinary eclecticism or consumerist individualism from the natural, conservative, and ethnically rigid eating habits of the past. In fact, eating habits changed and evolved long before the rise of a modern consumer market for food. Human eating habits originate in a paradoxical, and perhaps universal, tension between a preference for the culinarily familiar and the equally human pursuit of pleasure in the forms of culinary novelty, creativity, and variety.

Neither the anthropologist nor the man on the street doubts that humans can be picky eaters, or that humans can exhibit considerable conservatism in their food choices. If you doubt popular wisdom, imagine serving a plate of tripe, corn fungus, or caterpillars at a diner in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Woebegone. Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort.

But cultural conservatism, while it cannot be ignored, cannot explain the history of the bagel, where instead we see evidence of human adaptability and curiosity. Cooks know this combination well: they substitute ingredients when necessary, even in well-loved recipes; they “play with their food” on occasion, just for the pleasure of finding new tastes. When people of differing foodways come together, whether cooks or merely eaters, they will almost invariably peek into one another’s kitchens. They will not like all they find, but they are usually curious and excited to try some of it.

Two closely related histories—of recurring human migrations and of changes in the production and marketing of food—help us to understand

why and how American eating habits, and identities, have evolved over time. The migrations sparked by the European empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mixed the foodways of Spanish and indigenous Americans in today's Southwest and Florida; English, French, Dutch, or German culinary traditions were combined with Indian practices in the Northeast; and African, English, Scotch-Irish, French, and native American eating habits influenced the cuisine of the Southeast. During the long nineteenth century, successive waves of Irish, British, German, Scandinavians, Slavs, Italians, Jews, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans changed the face, and the eating patterns, of American farmlands and cities. In the early decades of this century, though restrictive laws lessened immigration from Europe and Asia, internal migrations of southern white and black sharecroppers to Detroit and New York, and of foreclosed "Okies" and "Arkies" to the West, transferred eating habits from one American region to another. And in today's world, again, new immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America bring the smells and tastes of their homeland cuisines to Miami, New York, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles.

Four hundred years ago climate and terrain placed harsh restraints on local eaters, reinforcing regional identities, and even today we do not expect Iowans to fish for cod, or eat much of it. The United States remains a nation of many regional environments, and its culinary and ethnic history has been shaped by regionalism, reinforced by territorial expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and then beyond to Alaska and Hawaii. Already in 1550, however, sugar traveled the world because merchants could make huge profits by offering it for sale in nontropical climes. Today, changing technology, the use of fertilizer, and plant and animal breeding have vastly altered any local environment's impact on farming and consuming. Although regional eating habits persist in the United States, they are no longer straightforward reflections of a seaside location or a prairie continental climate.

If our eating is more homogeneous today than in the past, we can thank (or blame) a national marketplace through which the standardized foods of modern food industries have circulated. As farms gave way to "factories in the field," as huge canneries replaced women's domestic labor, and as the corner grocery store gradually gave way to supermarkets, the most ambitious businessmen, regardless of cultural origin, dreamed of capturing

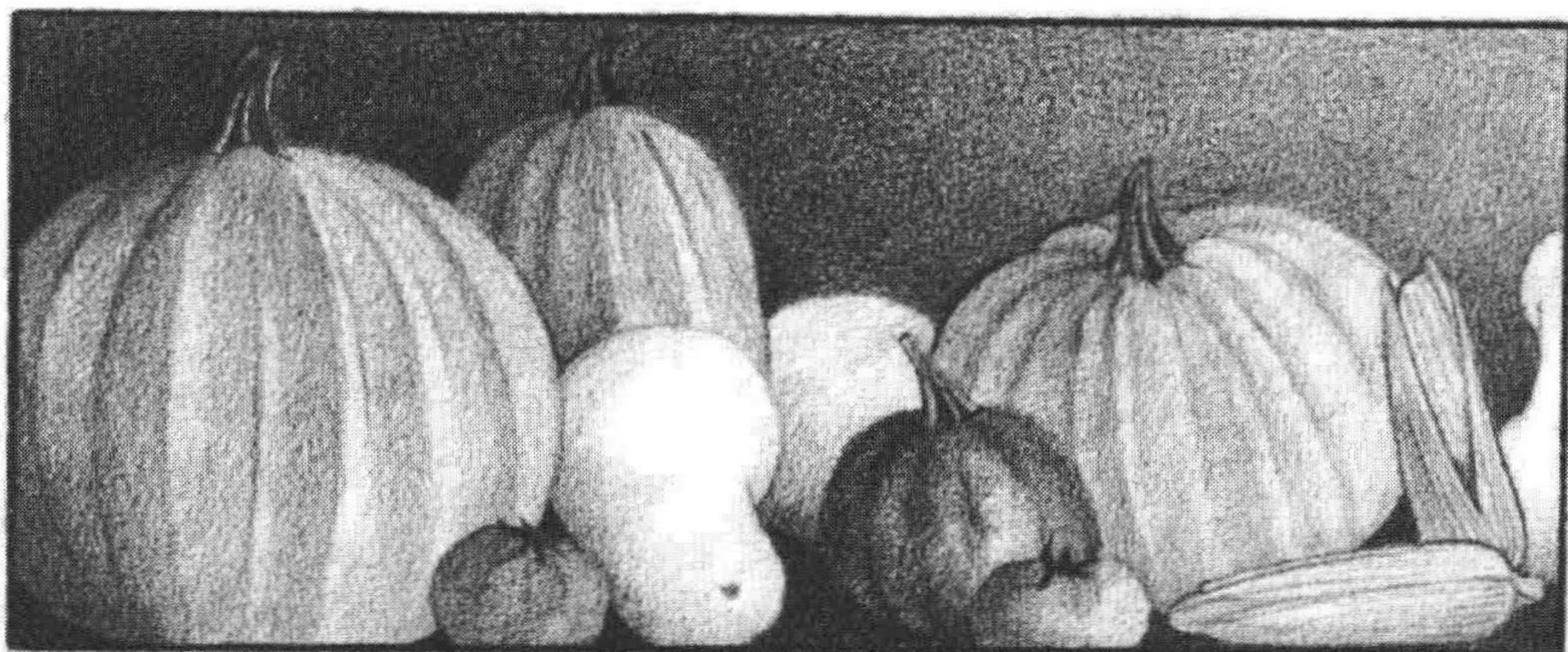
regional, and then national, markets by producing a few food items in massive quantities. Corporate food business fostered standardized foods and national connections, while migrations repeatedly introduced new sources of culinary diversity. Migrations also produced new “communities of consumption,” which generated small businesses to serve their taste for distinctive foods.⁸ Today, food corporations position themselves to compete in a wide variety of market segments defined by ethnicity, gender, age, and income. Yet their most successful competitors are small businessmen like Ghulam Bombaywala and the Lenders, whom many consumers trust to deliver “the real thing.”

Commercial food exchanges neither created nor eliminated the fundamental tension between our longing for both familiar and novel foods. While mass production delivered huge quantities of a few standardized, processed foods, expanding markets also linked producers and consumers of diverse backgrounds and tastes, opening opportunities for new blends, new juxtapositions, new borrowing. Food businesses large and small have lured adventurous consumers with novelties while soothing others with traditional foods. American eaters’ search for the familiar and the novel became matters of consumer choice, just as producers’ and retailers’ experiments with both innovation and traditional techniques became marketing strategies.

It is easiest to see how food choices reflect the eater’s identity when we focus on culinary conservatism. Humans cling tenaciously to familiar foods because they become associated with nearly every dimension of human social and cultural life. Whether in New Guinea or New Bedford, humans share particular foods with families and friends; they pursue good health through unique diets; they pass on food lore, and create stories and myths about food’s meaning and taste; they celebrate rites of passage and religious beliefs with distinctive dishes. Food thus entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties. Eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of cultures. Scholars and ordinary people alike have long seen food habits, both positively and negatively, as concrete symbols of human culture and identity. When we want to celebrate, or elevate, our own group, we usually praise its superior cuisine. And when we want to demean one another, often we turn to eating habits; in the United States we have labeled

Germans as “krauts,” Italians as “spaghetti-benders,” Frenchmen as “frogs,” and British as “limeys.”

To understand changing American identities, we must explore also the symbolic power of food to reflect cultural or social affinities in moments of change or transformation. Today, as in the days of the Columbian exchanges, Americans eat what students of linguistics call a “creole,” or what cooks describe as a gumbo or a stew. We quite willingly “eat the other”—or at least some parts of some others, some of the time. Eating habits like these suggest tolerance and curiosity, and a willingness to digest, and to make part of one’s individual identity, the multi-ethnic dishes Paz deplored. As food consumers, Americans seem as interested in idiosyncratic and individualistic affiliations to the foodways of their neighbors as they are in their own ethnic and regional roots. Ultimately, then, as students of American eating we must not only understand what we eat, and celebrate the many ethnic reflections of who we are, but we must also understand the roots of our multi-ethnic creole foodways, and ask of them, too, “If we are what we eat, who are we?”



Colonial Creoles

In 1770, in South Carolina, Harriott Horry wrote down her instructions for preparing “pompion [pumpkin] chips.” “Shave your Pompion thin with a plain and cut it in slips about the width of your finger, put shreds of Lemon peel among it, wet your sugar with orange Juice and boil it into Syrup. Then put in your chips and lemon peel and let them boil till done.”¹ If we were to follow Horry’s recipe today, we would probably call the product pumpkin marmalade.

Horry’s was a thoroughly European technique for preserving fruit in sugar, but it made use of a North American fruit—the pumpkin—much prized by natives but unknown to the English before they came to the Americas. Horry’s recipe was also distinctive to its region. It included tropical fruits, reminding us that the Carolinas of the eighteenth century were the northernmost reaches of the British Caribbean, with which it shared a plantation-based economy and a semitropical climate.

In 1796, nine hundred miles north of Horry, in New Haven, Amelia Simmons also used “Pompkin,” but she put in a pastry shell. Her instructions called for “one quart stewed and strained, 3 pints cream, 9 beaten eggs, sugar, mace, nutmet and ginger, laid into paste no. 7 or 3 [pastry recipes presented earlier in her collection] and with a dough spurt, cross and chequer it, and baked in dishes three quarters of an hour.”² Simmons’s dish is quite identifiable as pumpkin pie, well known to many Americans

today as a treat for Thanksgiving—a national holiday commemorating the survival of English settlers, with the assistance of Native Americans, in New England.

Simmons's recipe, like Horry's, applied an English technique (pie-making) to local ingredients. But unlike bakers of today's pumpkin pies, Simmons used cream and eggs lavishly, while treating sugar as a minor ingredient, just one of the spices ("sugar, mace, nutmet and ginger") that flavored her pie. Here we see the influence of region again. Cows, and dairy production, flourished in New England's cool climate, as they did not in coastal South Carolina.

The recipes of Horry and Simmons reflect the distinctive environments and economies of America's many regions. But colonial cooks did not limit themselves to local products, although these were the main ingredients. Long before the thirteen North American states formed their "more perfect union," colonial eating had already become a creole blend of the products and traditions of many interacting cultures from around the world. Unlike Horry, whose flavorings came from the tropical Caribbean, Simmons used the spices of the East, available in port cities like Boston through the merchant trade of the British Empire. As every school child once learned, Europeans' tastes for these spices, first acquired from the Arab world during the Crusades of the Middle Ages, played a far from indirect role in motivating their exploratory sea voyages outward around Africa and westward into the Atlantic. Recipes like Horry's and Simmons's indicate that trade in food—sugar, spices, and tropical fruits—was an integral part of Europe's conquest of the New World.

Within a century of Columbus's arrival, European ships were already transporting the curious plants of the Americas—potatoes, corn, tomatoes, peppers, and peanuts—to Europe, Africa, and Asia. But trade routes are usually a two-way street. Outward from Europe and Africa, flocks of chickens and herds of pigs, cattle, and sheep, along with the seeds of common weeds and food crops (coffee, rice, sesame, sugar, yams), reached the Americas and the Pacific world. Sugar cane, transported initially from Asia throughout the Mediterranean, eventually transformed the ecology and economy of the islands of the Caribbean, while dramatically altering the tastes of Europe and the Americas.

Here was an era of rapid dietary change, and not just in the American