

American Cuisine in the 20th Century

Lowell K. Dyson
patdyson@idsonline.com

Throughout the 20th century, Americans drastically changed their diets. Gone now are the straightforward meat and potatoes of the early 1900's. The types of foods Americans ate evolved slowly but consistently from a stereotypical "American" plate fixed by "mom" to a mix of cuisines and preparation habits.

Meat Dominated Americans' Plates

In 1900, Americans wanted. . . meat, meat, meat. And potatoes. And cake and pie. Not necessarily at all times and in all places, but mostly these foods described American cuisine in the 19th century and the early years of the 20th. Whether huge Porterhouse steaks at Delmonicos of New York City, "hog and hominy" on Southern farms, crown rack of lamb on New England tables, fatback in sharecropper shacks, or roast beef for Sunday dinner in the Midwest, no meal was such without meat of some kind at its center.

But always, in all sections of the Nation, beef was recognized as the king. And whether beef, or lamb, or fowl, or pork, it was most often

accompanied by roasted, mashed, riced, baked, or fried potatoes. Sauces and condiments might be on the side, and other vegetables and fruits might take up a niche on the table, but meat and potatoes were the basics along with heavy sweets, especially cakes or mince, cherry, apple, or berry pies, with large dollops of whipped cream, if affordable.

Even breakfasts would be unrecognizable to Americans of the late 20th century. The spread might include steaks, roasts, and chops, along with heaps of oysters, grilled fish, fried potatoes, and probably some scrambled eggs, with biscuits and breads, washed down with numerous cups of coffee.

No wonder, then, that heavily padded figures were the fashion for both sexes. Working men tended to be stocky and their wives matronly, except in the pellagra-ridden South. The financier J.P. Morgan and President Grover Cleveland set the standard for both the upper and middle classes, with their huge bellies accentuated by fashionable vests and heavy gold watch chains. The *femme fatale* of the 1890's was the beautiful 200-pound actress Lillian Russell, with her *softig* bosom and hips, and wasp-waist. Wealthy Americans and their "wannabes" believed in conspicuous consumption even before the pioneer sociologist Thorstein Veblen verbalized it.

Moreover, most believed that a weighty figure demonstrated good health. A popular self-help book of the day was *How to Be Plump*. The laboring class followed the example of the upper and upper middle classes as much as they could with fatty meats and flagons of beer.

By 1900, Americans of all classes had access to better quality beef and other foods, thanks to scientific and technological advancements in food production, processing, and transportation. Huge corporations efficiently processed and packaged all manner of foods. As railroads pushed their lines out onto the Great Plains, easy access to abundant and hardy new strains of wheat brought cheaper bread and other baked goods. Refrigerator cars swiftly delivered better quality beef and other meats, fattened in the Midwest and butchered in Chicago, to stores and restaurants around the Nation. The Meat Inspection Act of 1906 and the Pure Food and Drug Act, instigated by Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, and pushed by President Theodore Roosevelt, gave Americans greater confidence in the quality of their food.

In other areas of processing, the National Biscuit Company gained a near monopoly in soda crackers through neat packaging and heavy advertising of the brand name "Uneeda Biscuit." Henry J. Heinz

The author, now retired, was a historian with the Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, USDA.

skillfully combined new advances in canning with sprightly advertising to make famous not just his pickles but his other "57 Brands," a figure he picked out of thin air. In 1898, his rival, John T. Torrance, perfected condensed soups under the brand name Campbells. Heinz, Campbells, and Franco-American soon were jockeying for space on grocers' shelves as production of canned goods advanced exponentially.

Birth of "Nutrition" Puts Meat Under Fire

Not all social observers were enamored of America's love affair with meat. A new field, nutrition, appeared in New England. A group of Bostonians, referred to both respectfully and derisively as Brahmins, began to worry about the diets of working people and encouraged nutritionists to investigate the necessary components of a healthy diet for a good day's work. These new nutritionists believed that the laboring class spent too much of their income for expensive cuts of meat when cheaper cuts or other protein sources could be tastily prepared and were as nourishing. And, as a massive new wave of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe began arriving in America in the early 1900's, the new nutritionists rejected their alien tastes for such unheard-of dishes as pastrami, pierogi, borscht, or goulash.

These nutritionists spent much time and effort in a twofold uphill crusade. On one front, they fought to encourage immigrants to adopt "American" foods and ways of eating, but to little effect. On the other, they battled diligently to get American-born workers to eat cheaper cuts of meat, rather than the expensive cuts the wealthy were enjoying, and to eat more beans and other legumes. American-born workers vehemently resented efforts to take away the more expensive meat,

which they saw as their one great privilege in life, and immigrants simply ignored the nutritionists' admonitions.

In the early 1900's, these new nutritionists measured only the simplest things: protein, fat, carbohydrates, and water. They saw little value in fresh fruits and were actively opposed to greens, which they asserted required more bodily energy to digest than they provided. To the good, however, they advocated smaller, simpler meals, and they built the first steps by which more scientific nutritionists climbed.

A number of young scientists in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), especially in the Office of Experiment Stations, headed by W.O. Atwater, began to delve more deeply into the composition of foods. Colleges and high schools began to study what came to be called "home economics." More accurate measures of the value of various food components, particularly of fats, carbohydrates, and proteins, followed.

Food scientists had long believed that a high percentage of protein was necessary in diets. A challenge to this belief was posed by a pair of food faddists with popular followings, Horace Fletcher and Dr. John

Harvey Kellogg. The latter was a vegetarian and the former a believer in chewing every mouthful of food a hundred times. Both men agreed that Americans consumed much more protein than was healthy and that one could eat less, feel better, and live longer.

At first, USDA scientists disagreed with proposals to reduce protein in the diet, but by 1910, Russell Chittenden, director of Yale's Sheffield School of Science, recognized both the economic and health values of protein-reduced diets. This finding proved a slow sell to Americans but gradually took hold, as the slender "Gibson Girl" replaced Lillian Russell and as hemlines rose. The Nation's entry into World War I encouraged lighter meals. Then the ultra-thin figure of the 1920's "flapper" became popular.

Dr. Alfred C. True, longtime head of USDA's Office of Experiment Stations, used the wartime emergency and especially the appalling bad health of many draftees to make a massive survey of the Nation's eating habits, giving scientists a vast amount of data to work from. The War Department familiarized American soldiers from immigrant and regional backgrounds with simple, healthy meals. Interestingly enough, the war began the process of making Americans willing to try a "foreign" cuisine (albeit in its simplest form): Italian—spaghetti with tomato sauce. Italy, after all, was a major ally in the war.

Scientists Promote Vitamins and Minerals

Scientists in the 19th century had found that certain bacteria could cause illness; researchers early in this century began to recognize that lack of certain things could also harm the body. In 1911, Casimir Funk discovered a water-soluble nutrient later called vitamin B1 (a year later he coined the term "vita-



Early in the 20th century, potatoes were a staple of the American diet.

Credit: USDA

mine") that, in 1916, was shown to prevent the vitamin deficiency disease beriberi. In 1913, Elmer McCollum and Marguerite Davis found a fat-soluble nutrient that was later christened vitamin A. These discoveries rapidly led to finding many other vitamins as well as minerals that, if lacking in the diet, caused a variety of health problems.

Most Americans were not quite sure what vitamins were, but were convinced that they could lead to the golden gate of better health, sexual vitality, and longer life. From Kellogg's and Post's cereal boxes to CocoaMalt, Ovaltine, and a whole host of "tonics," Americans went vitamin crazy. At first manufacturers were not able to provide vitamins in pill or liquid form, so Americans avidly pursued vitamin-rich foods.

The near-craze for vitamins had another cause. Since the turn of the century, financiers such as J.P. Morgan and his ilk had assembled food conglomerates such as General Foods (Post Toasties, Jell-O), Standard Brands (Chase and Sanborn, Royal Baking Powder), General Mills (home of "Betty Crocker"), and Sunkist. By 1920, food processing had become the largest manufacturing industry in the Nation, surpassing iron and steel, automobiles, and textiles in terms of earnings. Competition for shelf space was fierce in the small family groceries that preceded supermarkets. A strong selling point for individual products became their vitamin content, ballyhooed on the radio and in print.

The circulation of women's magazines, with their increasing panoply of recipes that often used brand names, increased greatly during the 1920's. Even marginal food items such as Fleischmann's yeast, no longer in heavy demand by home bakers, was touted for its vitamins and minerals, curing pimples, boils, "fallen stomach," and other disasters. Thousands of pimply teenagers

and others chewed the slimy stuff three times a day until the Food and Drug Administration stepped in to halt the more outrageous assertions. Parents, not wanting their children to grow up "vitamin-deficient," heeded the claims of manufacturers. The author, after a long illness, had the favor of ingesting one of the abominations of the period, chocolate-flavored cod liver oil. Milk consumption, which had been declining, rose again after its preventative and curative powers were discovered.

Although scientists knew by 1921 that vitamins were necessary to good vision and good health in general, exactly what they did or what quantity was necessary remained an enigma. The negative effects of increased processing of food, such as loss of vitamins and minerals, were not mentioned by advertisers. And when such leading nutritionists as Elmer McCollum of Johns Hopkins and Lafayette Mendel of Yale appeared on a Betty Crocker "radio special" in 1934 to defend the nutritional value of white bread, critics charged that the food industry had co-opted the educational and scientific establishments.

Menus Become More "Americanized"

The cost of most foods declined during the 1920's. A contemporary study of upper middle class professionals in the San Francisco Bay area showed that they spent about 16 percent of income on food. A 1924 Bureau of Labor Statistics study indicated that the working class spent about 38 percent of income for food, which was still much less than earlier generations. Studies showed that workers averaged 2 pounds more of food per day in 1928 than in 1914 and ate more refined sugar, bread, and starch products, leading to obesity and health problems.

One of the aims of old-line nutritionists, to get immigrants to adopt

"American food," was advanced, especially after passage of the Immigration Act of 1924. As immigration was practically closed for many years, the connection to the foods of the "old country" became more and more tenuous. Home economics teachers, school lunch planners, and advertisers hammered away at second- and third-generation immigrants to "Americanize" their diets. For most, dietary assimilation became a mark of pride.

By the 1920's and 1930's the outlines of what became American-standard meals were common. The breakfasts that in earlier years were heavy on meats and breads became citrus fruit, dry cereal and milk, or eggs and toast. Lunches were light: sandwich, salad, soup. Dinners changed the least, but portions became smaller: roast or broiled meat, potatoes, vegetables, and dessert, with the latter often omitted. A special dinner with four guests might be enlarged to consist of shrimp cocktail, vegetable soup, roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes, stuffed tomatoes, and a dessert of peaches.

Mixed dishes and casseroles, once frowned upon as indigestible, became common although sometimes pretty bad. One shepherd's pie recipe called for meat, potatoes, and vegetables—with a marshmallow crust. A "one-dish salad" mixed Jell-O, fruit, and bottled mayonnaise. For times when the family cook had a full day, newspapers and magazines printed "emergency meals" that often called for canned mushroom or tomato soup. A real emergency food was tomato soup made of one cup of light cream and three tablespoons of catsup.

Isolated regional groups remained outside the norm, however, while the rest of the Nation progressed. The diet of the several million White and Black Southern sharecroppers and tenants during the first half of the 20th century consisted of the "three M's": meat (salt pork), corn

meal, and molasses. In the broad band of Appalachia, the menu often had considerable fresh fruit and vegetables in the summer but a grim combination of fat and flour in the winter.

Depression, War Brought Temporary Hiatus to Americans' Diets

The Great Depression of the 1930's affected classes differently. At its worst, in 1933, one-fourth to one-third of American workers were unemployed. Relief networks, which were sketchy or nonexistent to begin with, were stretched to the breaking point. Parents went hungry to feed their children. On the other hand, as historians often do not point out, those of the middle class who remained employed suffered little and, in some cases, fared better because of the decline in prices for food and many other goods due to decreased national income. Canners, for example, had to cut costs drastically. Surprisingly, meat consumption per capita rose during the Depression decade, though consumption for the decade was below the average for the 1920's. This may have resulted partly from distribution of relief goods, including canned meat, and hamburger sales as low as 5 cents a pound. Moreover, despite the increase of refrigerated transportation, Americans were eating 50 percent more canned and dried fruits and vegetables in 1940 than in 1930, almost as much as fresh produce.

World War II saw the gradual development of a food rationing program. Soon after Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), rumors spread of a shortage of sugar, bringing a wave of panic buying. The result was the issuance of ration books in May 1942. Items were gradually added to the list, generally with a prior announcement—which, of course, brought runs on the product

named. Rumors of a coffee shortage created one due to hoarding, which brought on 6 months of rationing. Americans resented rationing and often believed that it was unnecessary. Critics pointed to the farm surpluses of the 1930's and asked how conditions had changed so rapidly.

On the other hand, when the Government called upon citizens to cultivate vegetable "victory gardens," the response was overwhelmingly positive. By fall 1943, some 40 percent of the Nation's vegetables were grown at home. Unfortunately, because of lack of experience, many attempts to can the produce ended in exploded jars, spoilage, and even poisoning.

The Second World War brought almost full employment, and formerly unemployed workers could afford to eat better quality foods. War work brought a measured flight of both Blacks and Whites from Southern sharecropping into defense work and better food.

By the end of the war in 1945, a very large percentage of age-eligible males were in the armed forces. Physicians were appalled at the physical conditions of a majority of inductees. Whatever else service in uniform may have provided, it brought substantial and healthy food in large portions—albeit with a scoop of ice cream often slapped on top of potatoes in the mess tray. The average civilian ate 125 pounds of meat in 1942; the average soldier ate 360. Boys came back men—in bulk at least. The war years also witnessed the beginnings of the school lunch programs, which were a welcome boost to the diets of poor children.

Post-War Prosperity Brings Food Efficiencies, Scares

The end of the war brought years of prosperity instead of the depression that many had feared. Ex-servicemen enjoyed higher education and, thus, higher incomes as a result

of the G.I. Bill. They bought houses at Government-guaranteed low mortgage rates. They married and produced the "Baby Boom" generation. They were a generation of generous eaters, as their waistlines demonstrated.

Women, who had made up an increasing percentage of the work force during the war, were actively encouraged to stay home. Newspapers, magazines, and rapidly increasing television portrayed the happy home as one where mom wore a spick and span frilly apron—never soiled—seldom left the house, and produced good American dishes enjoyed by all.

Statistics revealed this as a myth. Even as early as the self-satisfied 1950's, women returned to work. The number of working wives increased by 50 percent during the decade, and the percentage of working women with children at home increased even more. Food could not be complex in homes where both partners worked. Frozen foods, which had first been perfected in 1929 and ballyhooed by Clarence Birdseye, became almost indispensable. Clarke Swanson felicitously named frozen meals, which included a meat, a starch, and a vegetable, "TV Dinners," and made millions.

A result of the rapid expansion of processing by industry was an increase in synthetic chemical additives, including some 400 new ones during the 1950's alone. A new breed of chicken, from the University of Delaware in 1949, paired with injections of vitamins, antibiotics, and growth hormones, allowed for the mass production of birds. While almost everyone agreed that the new chickens' taste was inferior to that of their sometimes scrawny, free-range predecessors, most agreed that less taste was the price for a more economical product. Consumers also wanted convenient chicken. At first, only whole chickens were available at the store,

then came separate thighs, breasts, and so on, and finally, deboned, skinless breasts. The per-pound price increased with each step, reflecting the added convenience.

As early as 1952, U.S. Representative James Delaney began calling for restrictions on additives that might harm consumers. Finally, in 1958, passage of the Delaney Amendment banned any additive shown to cause cancer in animals. But this was only the beginning of a movement strongly underlined by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, demonstrating that DDT and other sprays were rapidly destroying bird populations. The food industry was aghast at the implications. After initial hesitations, chemical manufacturers rapidly set their chemists, botanists, agronomists, and ornithologists to seeking solutions. Within a generation, birds such as the Bald Eagle, which had been at the brink of extinction, were again flourishing.

In the same year, after decades of warnings and discussion, the effect of cholesterol on the heart and circulatory system began to be widely discussed. Food processors and the agricultural industry were thrown on the defensive. Land-grant colleges, charged by Congress to educate Americans on agriculture and home economics, demonstrated to farmers how to produce much leaner animals, and dieticians promoted a myriad of heart-friendly food. Consumers became increasingly aware of the nature of the food they consumed. Moreover, the idealized female body changed again, this time from big-bosomed women such as Jane Russell, Marilyn Monroe, and Jayne Mansfield to slender models and actresses such as Suzy Parker and Audrey Hepburn. The combination of suspicion of additives, the fear of cholesterol, and the newly idealized feminine form led 1960s' consumers to demand a sort of "negative" nutrition from the food they consumed, with fewer

additives and calories and less fat, along with the "positives" demanded a few decades earlier, such as vitamins and minerals.

Working Women, Changing Attitudes Affect Diet

Historians hesitate to make "snap judgments"—that is, judgments on anything in the previous 50 years or so. Yet the last few decades of the 20th century entice one to make generalizations at the very least. Two important developments seem to be the employment of women outside the home (see "Cooking Trends Echo Changing Roles of Women," elsewhere in this issue) and the nature of meals and mealtime.

Working Women. At the turn of the 20th century, women working outside the home generally were maids or textile workers from the poorest economic classes; a few were "type-writers" in offices or operated telephone switchboards as "hello girls." Most women, however, were expected to be married and full-time homemakers. But the combination of labor-saving technological advances and the women's liberation movement since the 1950's expanded options for women. By 1982, over half the adult female population worked outside the home, and that percentage continues to increase.

With both partners working, many compromises and adjustments had to be made at home. Even the Crocker family would agree with



The first White Castle opened in Wichita, Kansas, in March 1921.

Credit: © White Castle System, Inc., all rights reserved

this, since Betty has been employed by General Mills for almost 80 years now. The traditional tasks of the housewife, especially cooking and housekeeping, became more shared. In some cases, men discovered that cooking could be an adventure.

Meals Away From Home. Frozen foods became a permanent part of family fare in the 1950's. For a couple of decades thereafter the working couple had two basic alternatives to preparing a meal from scratch. The widespread use of microwaves since 1980 gave the tired couple an incentive to "zap" a couple of frozen dinners after work. The other option was to eat out. In recent years a third choice has been "take out" of prepared meals from a restaurant or the grocery deli section.

Eating out options range from fast food to upscale French and Italian, and, more recently, Thai and Indian. Fast food eateries have been around a lot longer than many Americans realize. Even at the turn of the last century, saloons had their own form of fast food, the "free lunch" counter with its pickles, boiled eggs, and suspect sandwiches, provided for those who bought drinks, usually with a small cover charge.

The more modern fast food concept began shortly after World War I, however, with a barbeque chain in Texas that had "car hops" who literally jumped onto the running boards of incoming cars, jotted down the order, ran to the kitchen and brought it back, lickety-split. Two chains with similar outlook and names, White Castle in 1921 and White Tower in 1926, built white-tiled ultra-clean hamburger shops, often near trolley stops in cities where workers could "buy them by the bag," as the slogan went, at a nickel apiece. By the 1930's, fast food expanded to include drive-ins with sizable parking areas and food orders taken and delivered by girls in uniforms, often including cowboy boots and shorts.

Among the pioneers of fast food were the McDonald brothers, who had a small chain in California since 1940 specializing in the fast delivery of hamburgers. Not long after the end of World War II, they revamped their concept. Rather than having employees deliver orders to the cars, the McDonalds now had the customers come to a counter, place their order, and pick it up from one of the all-male staff.

In 1954, a food product salesman, Ray Kroc, bought out the brothers. Kroc franchised the chain with the Golden Arches. He was a fanatic for cleanliness, and he carried the brothers' ideas even further. To discourage teenagers from hanging out, he banned juke boxes, vending machines, and telephones. He soon outdistanced his older competitors, White Castle and White Tower, whose outlets were in the decaying inner city, by aiming at the bustling new suburbs. He rapidly adapted to the needs of the postwar generation with toys and games for kids. While most fast food outlets did not open until lunch hour, McDonalds' saw a huge potential market for fast food breakfasts and created the Egg McMuffin and its descendants. Other chains followed rapidly, and sales by fast food outlets grew to \$102 billion in 1998.

As Baby Boomers matured and incomes grew in the 1990's, upscale families raised their sights. The hustle and bustle of McDonalds' and other fast food chains lost some attraction. Home cooking made a comeback, but was split more evenly among couples as some men avidly read Julia Child or a host of Chinese cookbooks. And when the affluent family or single person wanted to eat well at home without the chore of cooking, they could find a variety of fully prepared dishes in their local grocery store or more expensive offerings in upscale chains such as Sutton Place Gourmet in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC.

Those with more moderate incomes found an increasing diversity of choices in frozen food. And for everyone, there was always that well-remembered comfort food of childhood, Kraft Macaroni and Cheese Dinner.

The variety of choice for Americans at the turn of the 21st century would be nearly unbelievable to their great-grandparents. Americans, who seemed locked into their meat-and-potato fare at the beginning of the century, think nothing of having an Egg McMuffin for breakfast, a slice of pizza for lunch, and trying their hand at Chinese stir fry in their woks at home for dinner, as the new century dawns. Whereas an overwhelming majority of Americans 100 years ago would have been very wary of any food outside their usual fare, most of their descendants glory in their willingness to adventure. As long as American farms and ranches continue to pour forth their diversity of produce, and other nations provide a wonderful variety of products, our descendants will feast on Nature's bounty.

References

- Carson, Gerald. *Cornflake Crusade*. New York, Rinehart and Co., 1957.
- Gabaccia, Donna R. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard, 1988.
- Levenstein, Harvey. *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Levenstein, Harvey. *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Mintz, Sidney W. *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1988.
- Witzel, Michael Karl. *The American Drive-In*. Osceola, WI, Motorbooks International Publishers and Wholesalers, 1994. ■