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# America's Melting Pot

## **Abstract**

The American public, in its increasing attention to foods, is demonstrating a desire for greater variety in restaurant service and foods. The author assesses recent restaurant food trends, including the emphasis on light food, entertainment in dining, and a broader range of ethnic foods.

## **Keywords**

John Naisbitt, Peter Claudio Martini, Culinary programs, Culinary Institute of America, Seasonal foods, Fresh regional foods, Ambiance, CIA, FIU

# America's Melting Pot

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*The American public, in its increasing attention to foods, is demonstrating a desire for greater variety in restaurant service and foods. The author assesses recent restaurant food trends, including the emphasis on light food, entertainment in dining, and a broader range of ethnic foods.*

America's culinary horizon is changing more rapidly than ever before. A growing interest in foods, better educated palates, and an increased awareness of what is served in restaurants have contributed to these changes. New American and regional American cuisines are emerging as firmly-rooted trends nationally, and ethnic foods are no longer limited to Italian and Chinese.

There is also an unprecedented emphasis on health, fitness, nutrition, and "light" foods, along with a great desire for guest participation in restaurants with more ambiance.

A virtual obsession with food is shown by the variety and volume of food and wine publications, together with regular sections on the subject in the daily press and periodical magazines and on television and radio. Bookstores and gourmet gadgetry shops are selling unprecedented volumes on the topic.

Television and videotex companies are providing culinary programs featuring demonstrations, recipes, and sources of supplies. Changing technology and advanced information systems now provide us with previously difficult-to-obtain information. One such recent television series, "The Great Chefs of New Orleans," has been extremely well received nationally. This particular show has informed viewers about restaurants in New Orleans, citing their ambiance and their unique cuisine. Over 40 million viewers weekly watch food shows on television.

## **Society Wants More Options**

John Naisbitt from the Naisbitt Group in New York, a company organized to analyze and synthesize major national trends, reports: "From a narrow either/or society with a limited range of personal choices, we are exploding into a free-wheeling multiple-option

society.”<sup>1</sup> These multiple options apply equally to foods and food service, as evidenced by the rise in the number of specialty food stores and gourmet supermarkets offering extensive varieties of imported cheeses, pates, cured meats, wines, fresh fish, shellfish, poultry, and game.

Canned ground coffee now competes with a variety of beans with blends and degrees of roasting available to suit the most discriminating palate. The number of restaurants grinding their own coffee beans is increasing steadily. The better quality product as well as the added word-of-mouth advertising is well worth the minimal effort.

Stilton, roquefort, and gorgonzola now accompany the more common Danish bleu cheeses in supermarkets and restaurants. In keeping with the national trend of reducing the amount of refined sugar and starch intake, customers are replacing desserts with an assortment of cheeses.

Fresh quail, pheasant, prime meats, and other specialty items are now available in more supermarkets where one-step shopping makes for convenience as well as increasing the public's awareness and interest in regional American foods.

Rising from America's melting pot heritage, U.S. chefs are stirring new customer interest and excitement. Traditional as well as creative original American dishes are being prepared, using foods indigenous to this country and a "new American cuisine" is evolving. The greatest contribution the American culinary revolution has given the food service industry is the desire on behalf of consumers and restaurateurs to experiment and introduce some exciting foods.

The variety and availability of high quality fresh ingredients are endless. Caviar from American sturgeons and sparkling wines compete with Europe's finest. Culinary schools are adding "new American cuisine" to their curricula. Reservations for dinner at the Culinary Institute of America's American Boutry Restaurant featuring this cuisine must be made well in advance.

Regional American cooking is Joseph Nickelson's latest endeavor. The former El Torrito senior executive has designed the Americana theme as an alternative to what he calls the "flavor battle"<sup>2</sup> which ethnic saturation can create. Nickelson plans to break ground late in 1983 at an Irvine, California, office complex for his first unit, called American Courthouse, which will have 270 seats for dining and 130 seats in a combination lounge/cafe. A limited menu with dishes from a particular state will be featured weekly. These "State of the Union" menus provide an appropriate response to the interest in regional American cuisine.

### **American Cuisine Is Light**

The new American cuisine places a greater emphasis on the use of seasonal and fresh regional foods. The Oriental influence is

apparent in the preparation and presentation of vegetables, and meats, fish, and poultry tend to be underdone rather than overcooked in order to retain texture, color, flavor, and nutritional value. More consideration is given to calorie intake in planning menus, since the objective is to serve lighter fare.

Foods are cooked to order and served at their peak of perfection and rigid rules of wine service are now flexible. American plate service dominates the type of service employed, allowing the chef to arrange food on heated plates for the best possible plate presentation.

### **Ethnic Cuisine Grows in Variety**

Although Italian and Chinese restaurants dominate sales in the ethnic food category, other types are finding their way to menus in all types of operations. As America embraces a wider variety of foods and a new American cuisine, demographic changes necessarily have an effect on future food trends.

In a speech delivered to the Grocery Products Manufacturers of Canada, J.L. Ferguson, chairman and chief executive officer of General Foods Corporation, stated the following:

There's one other major demographic change that's going on. And it cuts across all the others. That's the increasing diversity of the U.S. and Canadian populations.

For example, in the U.S. today, the fastest-growing groups are blacks and Hispanics. They made up 17 percent of the population in 1980. By 1990, they'll constitute 20 to 25 percent.

That trend challenges us to expand our product lines, and offers us some terrific opportunities. For example, for a variety of reasons, Hispanics have maintained their distinct culture longer than earlier immigrants. That means they'll represent an enormous market for specialty foods for a long time to come. And their food will continue to gain favor among the majority, just as quiche and chow mein and pizza did in earlier years.<sup>3</sup>

Miami is an example of a multi-cultural population, with Hispanic food operations numbering in the thousands, including Cuban cafeterias, Argentinian steak houses, Venezuelan and Brazilian night clubs, and Spanish theater restaurants. Customers frequenting these establishments are by no means limited to Hispanics, and their knowledge and interest in this type of ethnic food is growing.

### **Other Ethnic Influences Spread**

"Let them eat croissants," says Mel King, manager of Vie de France, the leading American croissant maker based in Vienna, Virginia. Opened in 1972, the company now sells one million croissants weekly from 18 retail stores and bakeries in 13 cities.

Croissant and bread sales total approximately \$30 million this year.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the single most significant French influence to new American and contemporary cuisines internationally has been nouvelle cuisine, with restaurants featuring excellence, elegance, and artful plate presentations as rarely seen before.

Japanese restaurants and steak houses are mushrooming in all directions. The Sushi bar is a most popular dining area due to its informality and spectator appeal. Well-trained personnel perform concerts of culinary artistry. Thinly sliced, very fresh tuna, snapper, octopus, and other raw seafood are new to American palates. The contrasting colors, textures, and flavors are quite dramatic. Paper-thin sliced sweet ginger in an orchid design and "wasabi" (green horseradish) accompany delicate morsels of fish and shellfish with zest. Preparation methods are different, and presentation is extremely attractive. Service personnel are polite and the hot towels are refreshing. Sushi and Sashimi menus allow for flexible consumption, and the price is relatively inexpensive. Sake and Japanese beers, such as Asahi and Kirin, dominate beverage sales.

Other cuisines adding taste sensations to the American palate are Thai and Vietnamese. Restaurants of this nature, which feature fresh, low-cost, spicy foods served in a cordial, casual atmosphere, are finding eager customers nationwide.

Another ethnic cuisine establishment gaining powerful momentum is the sitdown, affordable Mexican villa. Mariachi bands help customers keep time between Dos Equis and enchiladas. The colorful walls and plant-draped balconies create an informal setting which is lively and fun-filled for people of all ages. Chi Chi's, the fastest growing Mexican style dinner house chain, has planned to open 50 new units with an average check of \$7 and the average unit serving 10,000 covers per week. Several of these "affordable" restaurants, including Pancho's Mexican buffet in Forth Worth, are reporting a new profit for the second quarter, up between 30 to 41 percent over last year's figures.<sup>5</sup>

According to a recent Gallup report, Italian food is still the top ethnic choice.<sup>6</sup> New pasta bars featuring machines which produce fresh pasta in full view of patrons serve it with spinach, carrots, buckwheat, and tomatoes. Tortellini, ravioli, capeletti, and gnocchi have almost eliminated the old favorite, spaghetti.

### **Light Foods Are in Demand**

Whether it is a thin slice of raw fish, a cold pasta salad, an arrangement of crisp vegetables, or a croissant sandwich, the desire for light foods is everywhere. As the current interest in physical fitness and nutrition grows, so will the demand for healthier foods. Although beef, ribs, and high-calorie desserts will continue to generate significant revenues, there are indications of growing

demand for fish, poultry, and other white meats, soups, vegetables, salads, and other foods considered to be "light."

The promotion of light beers, light wines, light potato chips, and low calorie gourmet foods reflects this customer demand.

There is a greater interest in self-service salad, soup, pasta, dessert, and beverage. Food service consultant Edward Malone states that customers today are a participating generation:

They like self-service salad bars because it gives them a chance to mix with other people. They like to see what they are buying. They like salad bars and dessert bars and cheese bars. Entertainment is so much a part of their lives, they expect it in restaurants; so they react to discotheques, trios, and singers. They are a participating generation. They sing, they dance, they participate. And they like restaurants that let them do this.<sup>7</sup>

A number of years ago Patrick O'Malley made a statement that is still true today: "...customers will demand a more participatory role in eating out, requiring such new concepts as self-service beverage centers, cook your own steak, and assemble your own pizza. They will also insist on more informality and better nutritional quality."<sup>8</sup>

Whether restaurants feature self service or floor shows, the element of entertainment is a necessary consideration in today's changing industry. Establishments featuring animated electronic shows for children are transforming eating centers into entertainment centers in the minds of the younger set.

Rendezvous restaurants with large, well-decorated bar areas and up-beat music continue to attract customers, providing affordable food and beverage hand-in-hand with a social setting. Other establishments providing entertainment in the form of showcase kitchens afford the diner the opportunity to become involved with the show. Chefs in full uniform can be seen tending to large, rotating barbeques covered with meats, fish, and poultry, while hickory and mesquite fuel the fire.

All of the current trends with respect to new foods, cooking methods, guest participation, and entertainment directly influence design and layout of food production and dining room facilities. One author states: "Ambiance changes are becoming more scientific, too. We have been aware for many years that people's moods are affected by lighting levels, alcohol, and seating arrangements. Food service and institutional designers and operators have used these facts to achieve goals of getting people to order more and eat more or to leave quickly."<sup>9</sup>

Propellers and airplane wings hanging from the ceiling, as well as the "Hi, I'm Tootsie," routine, will not cut the mustard in today's industry. Theme restaurants must give more thought to their design, acoustics, menu items, and staff and traffic flow. The success of

future restaurants lies in the ability of management to plan and prepare for the expected change and in their adaptability to the unexpected changes. More discriminating customers, changing demographics, better facilities planning and design, the emphasis on health and nutrition, less formality, and the element of entertainment are vital considerations for continued success in the industry today. It is up to educators and industry advisory boards to equip new managers with the proper skills to deal effectively with this rapidly-changing industry.

### Footnotes

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