

What's for Lunch?

State and regional identities are a complex tapestry of sensory impressions. To many, “New England” conjures a certain image. Physical and cultural landscapes provide the form and context for this perspective. The rugged coastlines of Maine, pine-shrouded mountains of New Hampshire, rolling farmlands of Vermont, ostentatious architecture of Newport, old world charm of Boston, and the safe harbors of Connecticut all coalesce to create a vivid mental impression. But a “place,” naturally, is more than what is seen. It is sound and smell. And it is touch and taste. By any standard, New England is a mouthful.

The devotion to and appreciation for particular foods uniquely define us, as well as our notions and expectations of specific locations. Some scholars and popular observers believe that the world, and America in particular, stands at a major gastronomic crossroads. A corporate food culture that promotes sameness is now thoroughly entrenched in both the countryside and urban block. We consume billions and billions of burgers, fries, and other fast food cousins, cooked to time-and-motion perfection by high school-aged “chefs.” The boxed, frozen, canned, and prepared food sections of the supermarket are often substantively larger than the fresh meats, seafood, and produce departments. With few exceptions, the foodstuffs found in markets in Rockport and Rapid City, Bangor and Butte, Kennebunk and Kansas City, Lowell and Lubbock, Marblehead and Minneapolis, Tewksbury and Tucson are, regardless of the season, exactly the same. We “cook” our meals in the microwave and “dine” in front of the television.

How and what we eat is being increasingly discussed and debated in the media. Eric Schlosser’s recently published exposé, *Fast Food Nation*, illustrates, in frightening terms, how the industry has transformed America. Whether or not this account will capture the public’s attention and become a rallying call of any sort is unclear. However, the philosophical approach of Slow Food, an organization which promotes the preservation of traditional foods and the plea-

tures of the table, is gaining appeal worldwide. Concerns regarding the genetic engineering of crops, unexplained fish kills in both fresh and salt waters, and the emergence of mad cow disease along with the resurgence of foot and mouth disease are making headlines almost daily. We are reminded that food, in every way, is the cornerstone of life.

“What’s for lunch?,” whether asked (or answered) by a life-long resident or passing traveler, provides a window to the cultural identity of a community. For example, to most Americans, Connecticut brings to mind a rather generic New England maritime identity. Seafood from its coastal waters, ranging from lobsters, crabs, shellfish, and fresh-caught ocean fish, is abundant. Connecticut’s saltwater food reputation is well deserved. Indeed, the state is blessed with many outstanding seafood restaurants whose ambiance is enhanced with waters-edge dining or vistas of Long Island Sound. Visitors to Connecticut’s renown Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic Aquarium, or the nearby Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan casinos are within easy reach of the area’s best whole belly clams, steamed lobsters, and clam chowders. Seafood and maritime heritage are indeed mainstays of Connecticut’s and New England’s cultural identity.

However, there is more to the state’s cuisine than seafood. Connecticut pizza is an exalted creation that, at the very least, equals most other regions’ contributions to this American staple. Generations of Yale students continue to argue the relative merits of various New Haven pizzerias. Thin-crust white pizza (no tomato sauce) with fresh clams is a simple, but elegant dish that deserves genuine culinary acclaim. For the carnivore, New Haven also boasts that Louie’s Lunch is the “home” of the first hamburger, which traditionally is vertically grilled and served on toast. A beloved institution, this small restaurant and its original building have been relocated by the City of New Haven several times within the downtown area to avoid its demolition. Explore beyond the surface of a region’s culinary reputation and there is often a fascinating cultural surprise.

Clearly, what we like to eat influences what we produce and how we produce it. Much of the story of man's manipulation of the natural environment is a result of hunger and the desire to satisfy it according to cultural preferences. Native Americans certainly embrace subsistence and feasting as a cultural continuum. Subsequently colonized by meat and bread eating (and alcohol drinking) peoples, America's historic landscape reflects this farm-based practice as does our architecture. Fields and mills for grain, pens and smokehouses for livestock, and house kitchens with open-hearths for roasting and ovens for baking all became the American way of life.

Food motivates man to action and invention. Even beyond the need for subsistence, it holds great emotional power. It was a highly-prized beverage, after all, that discontented colonists chose to throw into Boston Harbor on that fateful night in 1773. A symbol so strong and so universal that no one could fail to appreciate it.

Changing tastes, literally, affect material culture in forms both small and large. From the design of 19th century cooking appliances to the development of entirely new global industries, food is an enormous source of creativity in the marketplace. As automobile travel became popular, restaurants were one of the first businesses to successfully capitalize on the trend by inventing "fast" food to better accommodate the social and cultural needs of the time.

What and how we will eat tomorrow is anyone's guess. Will we give up on 1,000 calorie hamburgers for fear of wasting away? Shun cheese, gelatin salad, and ice cream for good measure? Enthusiastically embrace (farm-raised) fish, bones and all? Will the (thoroughly cooked) egg return to favor and the chicken reign supreme? Will we devour turkey dogs at the ball park? Beans and rice at the drive-through? Could there be more barbequed tofu in our future? New census data confirms that the face of America is changing and with it the traditional shape, and perhaps the flavor, of our world. Only time will tell.

We, as all cultures truly are—forever have been and always will be—what we eat. Culinary historians continue to research and study local and regional foodstuffs, food preparation techniques and technologies, and pertinent customs, traditions and taboos, hoping to discern the inevitable forks in our road.

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Native Seeds/SEARCH's Conservation Farm about mid-July 2000 looking west toward the Santa Rita mountains. Plants include Tarahumara pepo squash and Tohono O'odham yellow-meated watermelon. The line of boxes are 6'x 6'x 6' isolation cages used to prevent cross-pollination between individual chile varieties. Photo courtesy Native Seeds/SEARCH. See article, p. 23.