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"Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom"

chapter eight  
EATING AMERICAN

A year or so ago, a colleague who was teaching a course in science writing asked me to offer a lecture on food to her class. I chose as my subject aspects of the history of domestication. I regard domestication as one of the most important technical achievements in the history of our species. The lecture was well received, I thought. But in the discussion that followed, someone asked a question that had to do in part with American eating habits. When I responded, I mentioned in passing that I did not think that there is such a thing as an American cuisine. I thought nothing about it as I said it; though I had never discussed the subject with a class before, it wasn't a new idea. But in the next five minutes of the dialogue, I came to realize I had said something that some members of the class found at the least

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hurtful, if not downright insulting. My *gaffe* (if that is what it was) became clear almost immediately. I was asked by one student whether, since I believed we had no cuisine, I also believed we had no culture. I responded with amazement. I talked momentarily about (North) America's highly regarded art, literature, drama, and poetry, claiming as I said it that our music was gradually achieving a stature equal to that we had won in these other fields. Even as I spoke I realized that the questioner was really wondering whether she had come across one of those awful persons who cannot resist running down his own country and, with her question, was just looking for proof. (I recall thinking that I had better mention some names—such as Ives, Gershwin, Bernstein, Joplin, Menotti, and Copland—in my answer, or I might be in even more hot water.) Another student took a different tack. He talked happily about "eating Thai" one night, and "eating Chinese" the next, and asked rather plaintively whether *that* couldn't be "our cuisine." He plainly felt that having access to a lot of different "cuisines" was a wonderful idea—and certainly better than meat loaf. It was all amiable enough; but I knew I'd said something a lot of people did not like to hear, nor want to believe. Before the class ended, the instructor invited students to write papers about my lecture; after a week she sent me copies of two of them, written by class members. Reading those papers made it additionally clear that I had touched a nerve. Neither paper included any comments on domestication; both talked about cuisine. If America didn't have a cuisine, these folks implied that it should; and they were certainly not prepared to accept my view of things. Though neither said it outright, I could infer that both wondered about my motives. As a consequence, I was left as interested in their sensitivity as I had been in the topic. Why, I asked myself, is having a cuisine important—is it because other people have one? Do people really think having a cuisine is like having a music, or a literature? Is having a cuisine like having a literature? Could it be good *not* to have a cuisine? If you don't have a cuisine, can you get one?

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One reason I want to write about American eating is my eagerness to explain more clearly what I meant then. Whatever the case, it seems important to make clear that not having a cuisine is *not* like not having a literature; indeed, not having a cuisine—assuming I can make any case at all—might be a price we should be happily prepared to pay for “what’s great about America.”

Anyway, “eating American” is too large and too complex a subject to be tackled in this chapter, and I have to acknowledge that right away. There are a score of highly appropriate subjects I ought to raise here. But covering all those would fill another book. Still, I want to try once more to explain myself in regard to cuisine—this time, I hope, more convincingly.

When it comes to food, grasping our particularity as a nation requires us to get some sense of where our history differs from that of other countries, especially European countries.<sup>2</sup> The United States is extremely large in area and population, when compared to any European country but Russia. Even in this hemisphere, only Brazil and Canada are about as big, and neither is as populous. These are two obvious ways in which we differ from most places. We are predominantly European in origin, and mostly Protestant in religion. Of course we are also a young country by European historical standards—about two centuries (or seven generations) old.

The whole New World stands apart from the Old, especially from Europe, because its vast areas, as well as the aboriginal peoples who occupied them, came to be dominated by relatively small populations, and in the recent past. The conquerors mostly came from a confined but important area of the Old World: Western Europe. In terms of numbers, during the first two centuries or so, it seems likely that more Africans entered the New World than did Europeans; but their population did not grow in place as fast as did that of the Europeans; and they were almost entirely powerless, as were the indigenous peoples of the hemisphere. Hence, though Africans certainly figured importantly in the conquest and its aftermaths, though they were later joined by

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substantial migrant Asian populations, and though some native peoples of the hemisphere survived the impact, the Europeans were the powerholders. Their overlordship was achieved in the course of less than two centuries. Spanish and Portuguese domination, from what is the Southwest of the United States today to Tierra del Fuego, was largely in place by 1700. The insular, Caribbean region was divided up among five powers, all warring upon Spanish hegemony. That other New World areas farther north took longer to become colonial was as much a function of European wars as it was of any serious indigenous resistance.

In effect, seven nations—and to a large extent, people from those seven nations only—predominated in the conquest: Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. Norway, Germany, and Italy were not yet countries; but in the eighteenth century, German migration to the hemisphere was substantial, and in the nineteenth, so was Scandinavian, Italian, and East European migration. By the end of the eighteenth century, the United States had become a sovereign state, the hemisphere’s first. Most Americans at the start of the nineteenth century were white and North European in origin. What the United States fully shares with many of its New World neighbors is its newness as a nation, and its being composed almost entirely of the descendants of migrants, coming from elsewhere. We share with Canada, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and perhaps Costa Rica the background fact that the vast majority of today’s inhabitants are descended from migrants who came from Europe.

A particularly cruel consequence of conquest was the runaway depopulation of immense areas, due to the combined effects of disease, war, enslavement, and inhuman labor practices. The early movements of Europeans and Africans to the hemisphere were soon followed by others; and that movement of new peoples, especially to the United States, has literally never ceased. Except, of course, for the descendants of Native Americans—anciently descended themselves, in turn, from migrants from

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Asia—all North Americans are originally from somewhere else, particularly from Europe.

In the United States immigration continued apace during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While its volume relative to the settled population has declined, the absolute numbers have remained high; and in the last half century, the origins of the newcomers have become much more diverse. Immigration laws in the nineteenth century had been aimed at maintaining the ethnic structure of United States society as it was then constituted, largely North European; only since World War II was that bias modified legislatively. The pace of continued immigration, while shared with some other hemispheric nations, is another relevant marker of North American distinctiveness.

At the same time that immigration has continued, national history has been marked by steady territorial expansion. The Louisiana and Gadsden purchases, the purchase of Alaska, the Spanish American War, the acquisition of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, for example, and the North American imperialist policies these military conquests and purchases represented, all played a part. But while Europeans were migrating to colonial areas such as Canada, South Africa, and Australia, in our case migrant Europeans were coming to what was already a sovereign and democratic country—becoming citizens as well as inhabitants. In each instance of additional expansion, there followed further settlement, as in Hawaii and Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the (U.S.) Virgin Islands. This expansion and incorporation is another distinctive feature of United States society worthy of mention here. In most of the Americas, people who came from elsewhere had their future quite firmly charted for them by their class status on arrival; in the United States, that was not so much the case. Public education, expanding economic opportunities, and the openness of the political system produced unexpected and dynamic results.

Since its establishment as a nation, the United States has been marked by a high degree of mobility, above all geographi-

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cal. Expansion westward meant a spreading out and filling up of the country as it grew. Such expansion involved military, then cultural, aggression against Native Americans, a part of our history which has come to be acknowledged publicly, more and more. Less noticed has been the enormous long-term benefit of seemingly infinite land resources for farming and, even more, ranching—a steadily dwindling treasure upon which the nation has battened for centuries, and the presence and availability of which has profoundly affected the way our eating habits (and other habits) have taken shape.

From early on, this was a highly mobile country not only occupationally, but also economically. Perhaps upward mobility is particularly noticeable when the rising group includes newcomers. Today, the bankers, generals, CEOs, and members of Congress in this country who have recent foreign forebears are legion. This makes us different and, in the eyes of, say, Englishmen of Germans, it may also make us seem rather undiscriminating. Imagine the German army with its top general a child of Turkish immigrants! Or the British army led by a child of Pakistani immigrants!

From the end of the eighteenth century onward, different regions of the new land called the United States gave rise to somewhat different diets. One reason for these differences was the wide variation in natural environments—the Southwest versus the Gulf Coast versus New England versus the Northwest Pacific, for example. Another was the differing food habits of various migrant groups. Broad differences between, say, New England cooking and Southern cooking can certainly still be sketched in. On a narrower canvas, we can speak of “Cajun” cooking, say, or “Pennsylvania Dutch” cooking, and still have it mean something. In the Midwest, some Scandinavian culinary traditions were established; in large Eastern cities, Italian and East European cooking habits took hold. To these older patterns have been added numerous others since World War II, of which Asian foods and cooking methods, only poorly represented in

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this country before, are the most visible, though not the only ones.

Yet such variety does not equal a cuisine, and is not the same as a cuisine. There are at least two reasons why such an assertion may seem unwarranted. On the one hand, there do appear to be *regional cuisines*, of the sort mentioned in chapter 7, which I described as the only "real" cuisines, anyway. On the other, I have contended that national cuisines are not cuisines in the same sense. So I must explain myself.

Since our beginnings as a nation, Americans have sought ways to integrate and assimilate newcomer populations within some generalized American culture. Though prejudice against both African Americans and American Indians (and in its more recent forms, toward other nonwhite populations as well) has militated against that process, most newcomers have been encouraged to forgo their traditional cultures in order to "become American." What this means is not always so clear. But the public educational system, above all, and the tremendous power of peer pressure, working on both children and adults, has helped to reshape the behavior and outlook of successive generations of new arrivals.

Several different things are happening at once. More people coming from different places continue to arrive. They are subject to pressures to change their ways, including their foodways, by an Americanization process that goes on in the schools, in the media, and in the course of daily life. The demands of new jobs and new lifestyles, and the desires and claims of the children of migrants, put great negative pressure, great pressure to change, upon older, imported standards. Geographical and socioeconomic mobility accompany these new pressures. We are not surprised to find Hmong tribespeople in Montana, Vietnamese fishermen in Texas, Sikh and Korean storekeepers in California. In many different ways, some subtle and some obvious, these people are changing their behavior and, unbeknownst even to themselves, some of their values as well, as they "become Ameri-

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can." How these migrants may identify themselves culturally is not in dispute, particularly if they continue to use their native language; but the cultural identity of their children is a different issue and likely to be changing rapidly.

That there are powerful pressures toward sameness, working particularly upon children, may be thought to increase the homogeneity of American food habits. Such foods as hot dogs, hamburgers, ice cream, and pizza are integral to acceptable adolescent behavior, regardless of origins; young people are intensely aware of it. In a certain way, then, these pressures do push toward homogeneity. But while learning to eat ice cream, and at fast food and ethnic restaurants, has the effect of increasing homogeneity of a kind, this experience is not the same as learning, or creating, a cuisine. Strictly speaking, by learning such behavior people are becoming sociologically more alike, but it is not really clear that they are becoming culturally more alike.

Americans eat out at ever-higher levels of frequency, and barring serious economic contractions, that trend will continue. At this point, nearly one-half of the money spent on food is spent on eating out. But we have little data on how eating-out patterns vary by class. It seems to me that eating out could only be cuisine-related if it means Japanese-Americans were going to Japanese restaurants, and Italian-Americans to Italian restaurants. But in such a case, we wouldn't be speaking about an American cuisine, but about the "national" cuisines of other nations, being eaten by persons historically descended from immigrants from those nations. Sociologically, that doesn't seem important at all, especially because the people doing it would probably not think of it that way. At the same time, I don't think that there is a reliable manner in which to speak of unhyphenated Americans going to unhyphenated American restaurants to eat American cuisine, because I believe that what they eat cannot be convincingly described as cuisine.

Of course we can describe what is eaten in culinary terms, and that may be adequate for some readers. What would the cat-

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egory include? Certainly hamburgers, and probably Southern fried chicken, and clam chowders and baked beans, steak, ribs, and perhaps chili, and hot dogs, and now, pizza, and baked potatoes with "the works." We would have a dessert list beginning with apple pie, and we could have many dishes based on maize. But there is no need to enumerate here all of the dishes that might be on the list because there are so many good American cookbooks that do the job, and no end of irrepressible enthusiasts.<sup>3</sup> Despite those things, however, the list of ten favorite lunch and dinner "entrées" for 1994, collected by the NPD market research group, starts off with pizza and ham sandwiches and hot dogs, and ends with cheese sandwiches, hamburger sandwiches, and spaghetti. I don't think anyone wants to call that array a cuisine.

Of the items on any more serious list, nearly all of the dishes would be assignable to regional cuisines, which is as it should be: all so-called national cuisines take from regional cuisines. The maize dishes, lobsters and terrapins, the steaks and pork roasts, the Boston baked beans, soft shell crabs and Manhattan clam chowders would all deserve to be here. But regional cuisines in the United States have undergone great change in the last half century, most of it diluting or modifying the cuisines themselves. The destruction of native stocks of such foods as salmon, shad, striped bass, terrapin, and crabs has seriously undermined regional cuisines, for instance. But even more has been done to change them by commercialization, a major debilitating influence.

Local variation in cuisine is under continuous pressure from commercial enterprise aimed at profiting by turning into a national fad every localized taste opportunity. Any natural product that is available in a place or a season, and any distinctive cooking or flavoring method, excites merchants, packers, and processors intent on broadening their market. Of course not all of the products travel, and many do not travel well. In the view of food businessmen it makes good sense to alter the nature of such goods in

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order to make them available elsewhere, even if they no longer are (or taste like) what they were at home. In the course of the "development" of these new goods, their character is altered, and the manner in which they had been prepared is likely to be modified—more commonly, simplified or abandoned. In many cases the new product is no longer the same as the old product, and is prepared in new ways, which are reduced and cheapened versions of the old ways. What happened in recent years with "blackened redfish" is a fair example: swift vulgarization of its preparation, substitution of other fish for redfish, cheapening of the recipe, and another fad soon forgotten. The regional foods most likely to remain more authentic are exactly the ones that cannot be shipped, or do not travel well, or are either difficult or impossible to copy. But not surprisingly, that they are difficult or impossible to copy has never discouraged a North American food salesman. Hence certain foods that are regionally distinctive become known to people elsewhere who have never eaten them except in the form of substitutes lacking any resemblance at all to the original.

Such bowdlerization of food is still less frequent in Europe and elsewhere. While restaurants in Northern Germany may vaunt their Bavarian dishes, retail food markets are not likely to sell modified variants of Bavarian food. The same is true for France, and indeed for all of Europe. While one can eat *bouillabaisse* in a Paris restaurant that resembles *bouillabaisse* in Marseille, the retail food stores of Paris do not yet offer Parisians a *bouillabaisse* "exactly like the one you ate in Nice, that you can now make at home—and in just minutes!" To be sure, perhaps they soon will, so strong are the pressures to "modernize." But I suspect that commercialization of this sort has been especially effective in the United States because we lack a standard cuisine against which to test the sales pitch. Given our heterogeneous origins, with what do we compare a new food, when deciding whether to try it (or, for that matter, whether we like it)?

It is easy to romanticize the food of other cultures, and to un-

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deremphasize worldwide trends toward Westernized food patterns. We Americans are probably not so exceptional as I may seem to make us out to be. But in much of the world the food repertory is still more closely tied to seasonal availability. There are still large populations subsisting on foods drawn from a relatively narrow geographical region. In many vast areas elsewhere there are peoples who still cook in more and eat out less than we, and whose diet contains one or several staple foods eaten every day, perhaps even at every meal. Such people are differently equipped to judge any new food from most of us.

By "most of us" I mean here literate Americans of the middle class, probably with some college education, travel experience, and familiarity with ethnic restaurants. We are not given to judge each food novelty against a background of commonly recognized foods that we all eat frequently. We tend to try new foods, seeking novelty in eating, as we do in so many aspects of life. We are inclined to identify that novelty with knowingness, with sophistication; and certainly being open to new experience is a good value, most of the time. Because of our openness and the dynamism of the food vendors, in the United States in recent years consumers have learned about hummus, falafel, bagels, "designer" coffees, coriander, basil, arugula and radicchio, Jerusalem artichokes, jicama, quinoa, buckwheat groats, new rice varieties (jasmine, arborio, basmati), lactose-free milk, scones and other sweet breads (not sweetbreads!), breads baked with ingredients such as tomatoes or olives, a staggering variety of capsicums, soy milk, tofu and dried soy products, previously neglected seafoods such as monkfish, "artificial" crabmeat (surimi), and many subtropical fruits, such as mangoes, soursops, red bananas, and star apples, and a dizzying number of packaged foods designed to relieve our worries, especially about fiber and fats.

We may each individually decide which items in this cornucopia we like, and which we do not like. Some of us may even take up cooking or using one or another of them in our meals at

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home. If so, such foods will not be jostling with our cuisine; they will be jostling with our quiche, our pasta, our chicken breasts, our hamburgers, our peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches, our barbecues, our steaks, our ham sandwiches, and our yogurt. These are among the things we eat the most. We can, if we wish, call them our cuisine.

As suggested earlier in this book, I do not see how a cuisine can exist unless there is a community of people who eat it, cook it, have opinions about it, and engage in dialogue involving those opinions. This is not to say that people cannot debate the merits of various restaurant renderings of *quesadillas* or *chao dze*; but that is not the same as having a cuisine. On the one hand, then, the regional cuisines of which we may speak have tended to lose some of their distinctiveness in the dilution and "nationalizing" of regional specialties. On the other, I do not believe that any genuine national cuisine has emerged as yet from this process. We do have a list of favorite foods, which we eat all of the time, and that list is broadly representative nationally; I have already enumerated most of it.

What, then, does typify American eating habits? It is clear that class, regional, and ethnic differences profoundly affect differences in eating behavior. A noticeable number of Americans now seek organically grown fruits and vegetables. About 7 percent of the nation is said to be vegetarian. Many people eat along lines prescribed by religious identity; others—but nowhere near so many as we may think—take considerations of health very seriously in the way they eat. There are also differences at the group level which betray class origins or class prejudices. In alcoholic choices, the attention paid to bread, the label-reading habit, the intense concern about weight, the sympathy toward vegetarianism, and the respect given "foreign" foods, some segments of the American middle class exhibit difference. But for the majority of the American people (including many in the above list), the following features are probably correct: eating out frequently,

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often choosing fast foods, as well as ordering take-out food to eat at home; eating much prepared and packaged foods, which require only intense heat or nothing at all to be "cooked"; continuing to eat diets high in animal protein, salt, fats, and processed sugars, low in fresh fruits and vegetables; drinking more soda than tap water; and consuming substantial quantities of labeled (low fat no cholesterol fat free lots of fiber no palm oil good for you) foods, packaged to encourage the consumer to feel less guilty about what he is really choosing to eat.

This list is discouraging and negativistic; of course not everyone eats this way, or all of the time. But it is worth pondering the fact that food labeling, and considerable publicity about healthier eating, have not significantly affected food habits nationally, at least not yet. The ten major sources of calories in the United States diet, according to the Department of Agriculture, are whole and low-fat milk; white bread, white flour, rolls, and buns; soft drinks, margarine, and sugar; and ground beef and American cheese. Such a list is worrisome, at the very least on health grounds, especially because of the fats and sugars. But if you are a reader who reacts by saying to herself "But I never eat *any* of that stuff!"—then ask yourself who does.

The importance of sugar and fats in the American diet is striking, particularly in view of the educational efforts to warn people of the need for moderation in these regards. During the twentieth century in this country, increases in fats and sugar consumption have accompanied a progressive decline in the consumption of complex carbohydrates [Cantor and Cantor 1977; Page and Friend 1974]. Carbohydrate consumption in the years 1910 to 1913 was two-thirds potatoes, wheat products, and other such "starchy" foods, and one-third sugar, the so-called "simple carbohydrate." By the nineties, however, the share of complex carbohydrates was down to half, that of sugars up to half. Over time, more and more of what was left of complex carbohydrate consumption took the form of deep-fried, salted, and sweetened par-

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ticles, so much so as to produce a special name, "munchies," for such foods. Though there are annual variations in fat and sugar consumption, both average figures have remained high since the end of rationing after World War II. In 1991, Americans consumed 164.9 pounds per person of sweeteners, and of those, 140.6 pounds were calorie-carrying (as opposed to noncaloric) sweets. If the Institute of Shortening and Edible Oils is right in their estimate that fats consumption (in meat and dairy, and in bottles and packages—that is, both "visible" and "invisible" fats) for 1993 was 137 to 138 pounds, then when combined with caloric sugars the total fats and sugars figure is 277.6 pounds per person per year. While this figure is based on disappearance statistics (thus probably overestimating actual consumption), it is nonetheless astonishingly high. The secular shift toward fats and sugars has been accompanied in turn by significant increases in the average weights of both men and women. Many authorities now estimate one in three Americans to be twenty or more pounds—that is, clinically—overweight. The implications for health and health costs of these statistics are now so well known that there is no need to review them here.

Americans also continue to increase the frequency with which they eat out, and the frequency with which they eat in fast-food restaurants. The numbers are interesting: in 1993, 6 percent of total per capita income was spent by Americans in restaurants; only 7.2 percent—1.2 percent more—was spent on food eaten at home. (Incidentally, spending only 13.2 percent of total income on food is an astonishingly low figure, when compared worldwide.) Eating out, Americans had 793,000 "eating places" (including here not only hot dog stands, but also army mess halls) to choose from; and in them they spent 276 billion dollars.

While individual customers choose freely what they eat, they must do so in terms of what the food service offers. Eating out reduces the individual's ability to choose the *ingredients* in her

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food, even though it may increase the length of the menu from which she can choose. The tendency to snack remains important in American eating habits; indeed, some weakening of the luncheon pattern may be attributable to the strengthening of the morning and afternoon "breaks" [Mintz 1982], with the effect of making fast food at noon a more attractive option. In 1993 snack food sales reached a gross of nearly fifteen billion dollars. Drink patterns in 1994 were consistent: 49.6 gallons of soft drinks, followed by 31.3 gallons of tap water, 26 gallons of coffee, 22.5 gallons of beer, and 19.1 gallons of milk.

The Department of Agriculture predicted a rise in per capita beef consumption in 1995, following 1994's 67.3 pounds. Beef consumption dipped in the years 1991 to 1993, but it is now rising again. Pork consumption is also expected to rise, as is chicken. Pork consumption had dipped slightly in 1990 to 1991, but it rose again in 1992 and has stayed up; chicken consumption has simply continued to rise steadily. Increases in meat consumption are paralleled by increases in the consumption of low-fat products—*any* low-fat products. Nabisco's Snackwells, with sales of 400 million dollars in 1994, are a glowing illustration. This seemingly contradictory behavior tends to substantiate an earlier assertion: people are both eating what they feel they want and buying other foods in order to feel less guilty. They're eating *them*, too.

The dizzying overdifferentiation of food actually increases sales enormously and, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is rationalized as giving the consumer what she wants:

Making the product "right" for the consumer requires continuous redefinition and division of the groups in which he, as an individual consumer, defines himself. The deliberate postulation of new groups—often divisions between already familiar categories, as "pre-teens" were created between "teenagers" and younger children—helps to impart reality to what are supposedly

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new needs. "New" foods, as in the sequence skim milk:half and half:light (table) cream:heavy (whipping) cream split differences in order to create new needs. New medicines, as in the treatment of daytime headaches and nighttime headaches or daytime colds and nighttime colds, do the same. [Mintz 1982, 158]

In all of the processes connected with American eating, the element of *time* is extremely relevant, yet barely noticed. When Americans speak of "convenience" in regard to food, they also mean time. It is simply assumed by most of us that we have too little time. I have argued elsewhere that the insistence upon the shortness of time and the pressures of busyness in American life is in one sense completely spurious. Americans are repeatedly told that they do not have enough time, I think because it serves to increase their aggregate consumption. Doing several things at once is touted as evidence of leadership; but what it does for the economy is to increase consumption. People are supposed to be able to drink coffee and talk on the telephone while they drive, smoke while they read, and listen to music while they exercise. Vaunting such skill makes good corporate advertising sense; people use up more stuff that way. No one seems impressed by the fact that Mozart didn't chew gum or watch TV while he was writing piano concertos.

As with anything else, not having the time to eat is a function of how much time is thought to be needed for other things. To take the easiest example, Americans would have more time to cook and to eat if they spent less time watching television. The shortness of time is in many ways, then, a coefficient of a view that our time is in short supply, but also already appropriately distributed. Most "convenience food" is successful because of prior conceptions about time. But much such food would not succeed if Americans cared more about how and what they ate. That they do not is a fact of great importance; it implies not only that they lack a cuisine, but also that they probably will never have one.

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What does the American future hold, so far as eating is concerned?

In a series of brilliant recent papers, Cornell University scientist David Pimentel and his colleagues have predicted sweeping changes in American agriculture, and hence in American eating patterns over the next half century.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the changes that these scientists forecast, if they do occur, will be more radical in their effects on American eating than even those of the last half century—which is to say a very great deal. Demographic, agricultural, and other factors enter in. Pimentel and his colleagues, working from present trends, predict a doubling of the national population by 2064; a reduction in arable land (through both erosion and urbanization) in the neighborhood of 180,000,000 acres, or 38 percent, in the same period of time; and a total exhaustion of national fossil fuel resources in not more than two decades. The figures on rapidly diminishing water supply are similarly worrisome.

This is an unbelievably grim scenario. If it eventuates, food exports (now calculated at an average of about \$155 per person per year, given our present population) would be reduced to zero. For Americans, food costs would increase by a factor of between three and five—at worst, up to more than half of total income. Should these calculations prove correct, however, the *composition* of the American diet would also have to change substantially. While nearly two-thirds of the national grain product of the United States, grown on over 100 million acres, is now used as livestock feed, by 2060 all of it would have become food for us, not for our cattle and pigs and poultry. In effect, Pimentel sees North Americans coming to eat as most of the rest of the world eats, with meat representing a much reduced fraction of our total caloric and protein intake. Since India's nearly one billion people and the People's Republic of China's even larger population get 70 to 80 percent of their calories and nearly all of their protein from grains and legumes, such a change in the United

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States would be in the direction of aligning North American consumption with that of the rest of the world. It would also contribute to a vast improvement in American health. Substantial farmland could be returned to agriculture; the number of bypass and cancer operations would certainly decline.

But will it happen? As I write, McDonald's looks ahead to a rapid expansion of its enterprises in such places as the People's Republic of China, where it aims to add 600 retail establishments in the next decade; and Japan, where it now boasts more than a thousand. Whatever the scenario for the United States, many companies are working hard to spread our way of eating worldwide. Nor is there evidence that many Americans are much concerned, either about our fossil fuel consumption or our diet. Driving cars and eating meat are highly valued acts; though both involve the expenditure of unimaginably large quantities of water, soil, cereals, and fossil fuel, there is no collective indication that anyone is deeply concerned. Only sudden shortages reveal, as if in lightning flashes, how deeply held such consumption values are; Operation Desert Storm was a case in point. Indeed, one "solution" to the Pimentel prophecies is war. Successful aggression could keep meat and gas available and affordable, at least for a good while longer. Its effects on American moral integrity would be utterly disastrous. But the enormity of the decisions involved in such trade-offs would not be clearly grasped until *after* the decisions were made. There is a real trap in our not separating what we are free to do, but need not do, if it is a bad idea—from what we cannot help doing, *even though* it is a bad idea, because we think someone is trying to stop us from doing it.

No one can look down the road and predict how the American people will behave, fifty years from now. One sinister prophecy is embodied in the words of Josef Joffe, the editorial page editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, who writes: "It is profligacy—being hooked on the sweet poison of consumption—that might yet lay low the American economy and thus American might."<sup>5</sup> But the

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worry is not that we will let our consumption gluttony destroy our economy; it is, rather, that we might let our obsessive notions of individual freedom destroy our democracy. The long-term lessons of our economic and agricultural policies are there to be learned now. But we have to be willing to learn them.

## **Notes**

### **I. Introduction**

1. See, for example, Malinowski 1935 and Firth 1957.
2. But apparently not only there. In his short story entitled "Sugar Babies," the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe [1973] skillfully builds a story with a moral out of the scarcity of sugar in war-torn Nigeria.

### **2. Food and Its Relationship to Concepts of Power**

1. See, for example, Elias 1978.
2. For a different view, see Pendergrast 1993.

### **3. Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom**

1. As one Puerto Rican ex-slave once put it to me when I asked him about