United States Food Culture: An Analysis of What We Eat and What That Reveals About Our Society

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Author Note

Rip ‘em Eaters!

Abstract

What classifies as “American food” is the topic of much debate both among academics and lay people. The United States is often seen as an amalgamation of a vast array of cultures and ethnicities from around the world, making it difficult to determine what cultural practices, norms, and relics are truly “American”. Yet being able to determine what components comprise American food culture is quite important for several reasons. Examining the history of food culture in the United States, the types of food that is accessible and consumed, who its accessible to and consumed by in which social settings, and also how food is depicted in popular culture and mass media can give us a better understanding of the class structure of this country, the effects of public policy and community efforts on dietary habits, and also how to solve diet-related public health crises such as obesity and heart disease. The existing literature in the fields of nutrition and health sciences, food studies, United States media and culture, and public policy reveal a complicated story. The food culture of the United States is broad, complex, and often contradictory, but exhibits distinct characteristics which reveal a great amount about the country’s values.

Keywords: Food, Food Studies, American Culture, Food Culture

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If one were to take a walk through the heart of any major city in the United States, they would likely be met with a wide gamut of restaurants, delicatessens, coffee shops, bistros, and beaneries that encompass a motley variety of flavors and cooking styles from around the world. Cuisines throughout the country are highly disjointed between geographic regions—and even within them—due to the availability of different flora and fauna to be used as ingredients, differences in climates, and the traditional customs and practices of the indigenous people, settlers, and immigrants who inhabit the region throughout time. Yet the United States is also saturated with fast food chain restaurants like McDonald's and Little Caesar's, and more recently, so-called "fast casual" chain restaurants like Chipotle and Panera (Green, 2011). These restaurants provide a relatively uniform experience to all consumers regardless of location, but do they deserve to be enshrined in the annals of American food culture? More specifically, is this what we define as "American food"?

Along with the increased proliferation of convenient, expedient, and often unhealthy food, Americans have become increasingly concerned about their health and well-being. The majority of Americans now believe that a combination of a healthy diet and physical activity can lead to a long and healthy life (Pew Research Center, 2016). Yet the United States is simultaneously besieged with massive diet-related public health problems including obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, the three leading causes of death in the country. As American society tries to once again answer the question of "what to eat" and attempts to improve themselves through their food choices, they often turn to mass media for guidance. Advertisements on television, the internet and magazines influence what people eat, regardless of whether they are

young or old. The ads people see are often deceptive and beguile consumers into buying their products. At the same time, the companies behind these ads are often bitterly contesting regulations and accountability for their practices—battles which involve large sums of money and government lobbying.

Legislative actions enrich American dietary habits and food culture by improving the quality, price, and accessibility of foods. Yet government involvement in what Americans eat has largely been met with popular resistance, as it is generally seen as an infringement on the independence and self-determination they hold so near and dear as citizens of the United States. Any government regulations that do pass are sometimes begrudgingly implemented by the agricultural, food, and drink industries, further decreasing the effectiveness of public policy efforts to improve our food and agricultural systems.

Clearly, American food culture is rich and diverse, but it is often contradictory and confusing, highly complicating our best efforts to define what it is. Yet being able to gain a clear understanding of American food culture is crucial to better understand the overall culture of this country. As the old proverb goes, we are what we eat. Our food has a direct impact on the state of our physical and mental well-being. Bad dietary habits are commonly linked to increased risk of heart disease and obesity, but new research have additionally linked them to increased risk of mental health issues (O'Neil, et al., 2014; Rao, et al., 2008). A lot of the socialization Americans do with other people revolves around food, be it nightly family dinners, the school cafeteria, or the once in a blue moon lunches with and old friend. Food is often a medium through which individuals can learn about other cultures and ethnicities by expanding their palettes with new flavors and techniques. Thus, in order to fully grasp and comprehend what constitutes American food culture, it is necessary to complete a comprehensive and multidisciplinary analysis which

delves into its many intricate nooks and crannies. By examining the existing literature in the fields of food and nutritional sciences, American culture and media, and public policy, we can piece together a history of American food culture, how it came to be and how its depicted, the socioeconomic stratification of food access and consumption patterns, and the impact of governmental and grass-roots action on our eating patterns.

Literature Review

United States History and the Development of its Food Culture

The United States of America has a peculiar foundation and history. It is often considered the first modern Western democracy and has served as a template for other nations to follow. Part of its particularity is the fact that the United States never had a well-established, birthright nobility or aristocracy on par with its European predecessors. In fact, the whole ethos of the American Revolution was a direct rejection of these principles and practices. The Title of Nobility Clause of the U.S. Constitution and the subsequent 1810 Titles of Nobility Amendment explicitly prohibited government officials from granting titles of nobility and U.S. citizens from receiving titles of nobility from foreign governments. This absence of a birthright nobility/aristocracy can help explain the lack of a prevailing food culture within the United States. In most societies, the ruling elite creates a cultural hegemony through which they maintain their power by influencing the ideas and norms of society. These ideologies are disseminated throughout the common society by social institutions such as schools, mass media, religious groups, and family structures and they help socialize people into the norms, ideas, and values of the ruling class (Lears, 1985). People willingly—albeit, often unknowingly—accepts these social structures and practices and help uphold them.

Yet the absence of a well-defined American elite class akin to the European aristocracy

means that the masses didn't always adopt the same sets of values, ideas, and norms as the elite. Though wealthy land owners dominated colonial and early American politics (and therefore, its culture), different geographic regions of the United States developed their own specific set of cultural norms and values. In the American South, plantations and slavery gave way to the Antebellum culture which borrowed themes, traditions, and beliefs from the English (Waterhouse, 2008). In the northern part of the country, manufacturing and industry led to different norms, values, and practices which tended to be slightly more progressive and Evangelical. These regional differences led to friction between the north and the south, ultimately culminating in the United States Civil War, a conflict which set back any efforts to create a unified national identity by several decades (Allen R. H., 2000). We still see this division in modern American culture, specifically in our widely disjointed food culture which ranges from New England clam chowder to Cajun jambalaya, Southwestern Tex-Mex to Midwestern Reuben sandwiches, and everything in between.

The quest for a perfect diet. Despite its incoherent nature, a feature of American food culture that has remained consistent throughout time is the desire to better individuals or society through the food they eat. This dietary self-improvement is an integral part of American gastro-politics, which we define as the intersection of public policy and individual food choices/dietary habits. Most laypeople are not themselves well-acquainted with the field nutritional science and therefore turn to authority figures they believe *are* well-acquainted. Du Puis (2007) notes "[t]he history of food advice in the United States shows that the search for a perfect diet parallels a search for moral authority" which involves both a messenger and a mediator that use deep religious or scientific connotations used to convey their message (p. 34). Du Puis lists the examples of John Smith, founder of the Mormon faith, who forbade the consumption of caffeine

and alcohol, and Presbyterian Minister Sylvester Graham, whose teachings of temperance and vegetarian lifestyle inspired the graham cracker; both Smith and Graham were attempting to deliver eternal salvation to their followers in part through their dietary choices. These appeals became more scientific with time, with popular figures, scientists, and self-proclaimed nutritionists all preaching various, often unfounded, pieces of dietary advice. In more contemporary times, this has taken the form of fad diets, health supplements, and other relics of what David L. Katz (2003) derides as "the contagion of nutritional nonsense" (p. 33).

Individual freedom and the right to choose. The independence and self-determination that is often prized as a huge part of the American national ethos influences individual eating patterns. Rather than eating with friends and/or family, Americans have become more inclined to eat alone in recent years (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Overall, household sizes in the United States gradually grew smaller throughout the decades, with single-person households rising from 17.1 percent of the population in 1970 to 27.4 percent in 2012, so it is natural to see some increase in rates of solo eating (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, p. 5). Yet Americans have also became increasingly pressed for time over the decades, meaning they must eat breakfast alone and on the go (usually in the form of fast food) or skip it all together. Frequent fast food consumption is clearly linked to an increased risk of obesity and other chronic diet-related illnesses (Davis & Carpenter, 2009; Jeffery & French, 1998; Rosenheck, 2008), and other research has also linked these increased risks with patterns of solitary eating as well (Tani et al., 2015b; Kim et al., 2018; Kwon et al., 2018). Furthermore, various research has shown that individuals who eat alone more often than they participate in commensality (eating at the same table with others) are more likely to develop depression as well as other social and mental health problems (Kuroda et al., 2015; Tani et al., 2015a). These are just some of the ways in which the food culture of the United

States has taken its toll on the physical and mental well-being of Americans.

American ideology also impacts the effectiveness of public policy on agri-food matters. Any attempts to limit food choices via government intervention (for example, by levying so-called “sin taxes” on unhealthy foods or offering only “healthy” food choices in public school cafeterias) fly in the face of American independence. In particular, sin taxes on sugary and unhealthy foods have actually shown to be quite counterintuitive. While they do manage to raise substantial amounts of government revenues, sin taxes often target foods that are socially stigmatized rather than those which are socially harmful, take a regressive toll on low-income people, and do little to combat rates of diet-related diseases and illnesses (Liu, 2018). Liu also notes that a hybrid approach to sin taxes has been proposed before, a model which would use the tax revenue to fund public health programs which increase consumer access to healthier foods and more health-conscious food labelling and portions, but these hybrid approaches have yet to be fully implemented.

Furthermore, obesity and other public health problems arising from diet-related diseases are often seen as the fault of the individual rather than a larger societal problem that requires government intervention to mediate (Brownell, et al., 2010). Though this trend has been decreasing lately due to increased acceptance of different body types (Obesity Society, 2014), this perception of obesity being a personal issue shapes and hinders the effectiveness of governmental policy in combatting these public health crises. Government regulations on what we eat invoke fears of a nanny state coming down and taking our right to choose away. Yet seeing food consumption patterns merely as the choices of individuals also morally absolves food and drink corporations from the consequences of their deceptive practices.

Major food and beverage companies have even banded together and lobbied the federal

government to *legally* absolve them from responsibility. The Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act (PRFCA) was introduced in the House of Representatives in 2005 by Congressman Ric Keller, whose campaign took the maximum amount of Political Action Committee donations (up to $300,000) from fast food restaurants including McDonald's and Wendy's. The PRFCA was meant to shield food producers and retailers from being held legally responsible for health-related issues caused by consuming their foods. Though the bill passed the House, it was voted down in the Senate. Ironically enough, Keller was unable vote on his own piece of legislature, as he was rushed to the hospital the night prior after suffering a cardiac arrhythmia (Allen R., 2005).

A comparison of food cultures in the United States and France. In order to get a better understanding of what makes the food culture of the United States so unique, it is helpful to compare it with the food culture of another country. Given the closely-intertwined history of France and the United States and the present similarities between them, it is only natural that we attempt to produce a comparative analysis between their food cultures. Though both countries are capitalist and place a high value on individual freedom and autonomy, their food cultures are vastly different. The difference is that France *did* have a history of birthright nobility and aristocracy which shaped its culture and created a significantly more structured food culture that is deeply ingrained into their society. As opposed to American food culture, French food culture encourages communal meals and smaller portions while discouraging snacking in between meals and overconsumption. This dichotomy is believed to have arisen because the United States "never developed an exciting, distinctive repertoire of flavors and corpus of recipes or cooking techniques that virtually all eaters and cooks would recognize or master" (Boling, 2014, p. 10). Rather, early Americans borrowed from British food customs and recipes, slowly incorporating

those of other European nations whose immigrants came to the United States. Since different ethnicities often settled in different geographical locations with access to different ingredients, it became difficult for a single corpus of food culture to come to form in the United States—until the modern age of mass media and mass production. Boling contrasts French and American food culture in this regard, noting that the "French are more likely to be guided by the desire for unique, memorable experiences and high quality food, and Americans to value large quantities of food, greater choices among menu items or combinations, and feeling that they get a good deal when they go out to eat" (p. 10).

The socialization of individuals into their country's respective food culture happens at an early age. In France, children in preschools are exposed to a wide gamut of dishes that value quality and variety, developing their palette. On the contrary, preschools in the United States are more likely to offer children simple, easy to prepare meals that appeal to them, such as chicken nuggets or pizza. This socialization sticks with individuals for a long time, creating expectations of what shape and taste food *should* be and leaving children "even more deeply suspicious of foods that are not part of their typical repertoire of foods, including vegetables of every sort" (p 13). Socialization of this sort complicates efforts to combat public health issues related with diet, as individuals develop a rigid preference that is difficult to change. While cultural practices and family tastes heavily influence our own individual eating patterns, governmental policy and community action can also play a substantial role shaping the food culture of our country.

Social Inequalities in Food Consumption Patterns and Responses to Remedy Them

Access to affordable and nutritious food. In order to rectify the public health problems associated with American food culture, we must first gain a clear understanding of their root socioeconomic causes. Obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases have often been linked to

inadequate access to affordable, nutritious and healthy food—a problem that is significantly more pronounced in poor and rural communities. Individuals living in "food deserts" (areas defined by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 as having limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities) are believed to face limited to no access to supermarkets or large grocery stores and are thus unable to access affordable nutritious and healthy food. Big chain supermarkets and grocery stores provide consumers with a wider variety of food products and typically have lower prices than the smaller grocery stores to which they do have easy access to. Consumers in these communities, however, typically do have access to convenience stores and fast food chains which provide them with a source of cheap yet typically unhealthy and innutritious food. Since these communities also tend to have lower incomes than other communities, individuals are less likely to own their own private means of transportation, which further complicates their access to affordable and healthy food. Thus, the convenience and time costs related with grocery shopping, food preparation, and cleaning up discourage many low-income working-class families from preparing a nutritious home-cooked meal and, instead, encourages them to choose an easy to make meal or just eat out at a restaurant (Economic Research Service, 2009).

Over the past three decades, food away from home (FAFH; that is, food purchased at a food establishment outside of one's home) has become an increasingly important staple of the American diet. Spending on FAFH surpassed spending on food at home (FAH) for the first time in 2010. This rise was largely fueled by the proliferation of casual quick service restaurants such as Panera Bread and Chipotle, which are often seen by consumers as healthier alternatives to traditional quick service restaurants such as McDonald's and KFC. However, on average, all

types of FAFH contain more sodium, saturated fats, and calories and less iron, fiber, and calcium than FAH. (Saksena, et al., 2018). The report also concluded that consumption of FAFH is related to access, personal preferences, and the socioeconomic status of communities and the individuals within them, once again alluding to the fact that individual food tastes are often culturally and socially influenced.

Government policy and its effects on food culture.

Agricultural subsidies. One of the main avenues through which public policy affects our food is through agricultural subsidies. Agricultural subsidies in the United States first came to major prominence during World War I but intensified during the Great Depression as the federal government took major steps to ensure that crop prices remained stable, farmers maintained their livelihoods, and that U.S. families had a steady source of affordable food. In short, the subsidies ensured that Americans not only had food, but a vast oversupply of food. Yet these subsidies have also had major unintended consequences on the food Americans eat. The current agricultural subsidy regime rarely takes public health concerns into consideration and has thus contributed significantly to the poor health of United States (Franck, Grandi, & Eisenberg, 2013). They determine which crops U.S. farmers will grow and largely dictate the price at which they are able to sell them, thereby guiding public consumption.

In 2004, 60 percent of the cropland of the United States was dedicated to corn and soybeans—the two commodity crops which benefit the most from government subsidies. Corn is used to produce high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) which is used extensively as a sweetener in a wide variety of foods while 70 percent of the fats and oils consumed by Americans are derived from soy; excessive consumption of HFCS and soy-based oils/fats has been linked to diet-related illnesses (Bray, Nielsen, & Popkin, 2004; Stanhope & Havel, 2008). Soy beans, corn, and other

government-subsidized grains and seeds are also frequently used as feed for livestock, as they allow animals to get fatter quicker. Agricultural subsidies effectively lower the cost of raising poultry, pigs, and cattle, making meat products significantly more accessible to consumers. However, consumption of fatty meats (especially processed meats) is also directly correlated with the prevalence of chronic diseases such as type two diabetes and heart disease. This has led various researchers to blame the current agriculture subsidy regime, at least in part, for the spread of diet-related illnesses such as obesity and heart disease (for example, see: Tillotson, 2003; Fields, 2004; Wallinga, 2010). These researchers suggest rather than eliminating agricultural subsidies altogether, the system is better off reforming so that it encourages diversification and inclusion of nutritious fruits and vegetables and so that the system can adequately deal with oversupply.

Public School Lunches. Another area of American food culture that is widely impacted by public policy is that of public school lunches. Public schools in the United States didn't always provide lunch to their students, let alone at a free or reduced price. Food that was provided for children largely came charitable organizations or individuals. As more American children began attending public schools, demand soon surpassed supply. It wasn't until the passage of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act in 1946 by President Truman that school lunches would be codified into federal law. The federal government would doll out cash subsidies to public and non-profit private schools and also reimburse schools for the cost of school meals, granted the schools offered food which complied with federal meal requirements and provided free or reduced lunches to qualifying students (Gunderson, 2014). Participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) has grown ever since it was enacted and numbered

nearly 30 million students across nearly 100,000); over 70 percent of school lunches are either free or reduced price (USDA Food and Nutrition Services, 2017).

Though these foods must meet certain nutritional and health standards, there is very little federal regulations on "alternative" foods on school campuses—that is, food or drinks sold on school grounds that are not part of the meals served by the school's food service program, such as items that are sold in vending machines, student stores or fundraisers, or á la carte items which are not reimbursable under the NSLP. Though some states and individual school districts have taken it upon themselves to enact their own policies on alternative foods, a 2006 study of the nation's largest school districts in each state found that none of the districts with alternative food policies had adequately addressed the dietary recommendations of the National Academy of Medicine, the nation’s leading nonprofit on health issues (Greeves & Rivara, 2006). In 2016, the USDA finalized federal regulations that created a specific framework and guidelines to help NSLP-participating school districts establish wellness policies that include nutrition guidelines for *all* foods served in schools as well as nutritional education and physical activity guidelines. Compliance from schools was not required until the end of the 2016-2017 school year, so the impact of the USDA initiative has yet to be quantified.

Impact of grassroots community action on food culture. Government action can provide wide-sweeping reform on food and agricultural policy, but it is often slow to take effect, or it is inadequate in addressing the specifics needs of different communities. As a result, many communities throughout the United States have begun to embrace alternative agri-food movements like farmers markets and community gardens. Rossi, Woods, & Allen (2017) reveal that Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs which allow consumers to purchase a “share” of a local farm’s harvest before the growing season in return for weekly boxes of

different produce later. CAS programs are shown to have a positive impact on both producers and consumers. Farmers gain a clear sense of consumer demand and can plan accordingly, rather than over-producing and hoping for the best. It also encourages farms to diversify their production and use organic, sustainable farming methods. On the other hand, consumers who participate in CAS have a vested interest in the success of local farmers which helps foster deeper community ties. Consumers also use the experience to increase their understanding of agricultural and food issues as well as modify their own health and diet practices. However, there is a steep startup cost associated with the CSA model, with individual shares ranging between $500 to $650. As a result, many of these programs are largely relegated to middle- and upper-class communities. Rossi, Woods, & Allen reveal that this economic barrier can be addressed through the use of CAS vouchers provided by the individual's employers or as a form of governmental assistance.

Other alternatives such as farmers markets have also proven to have positive impacts on communities, improving the health and dietary habits of participants, stimulating local economies, and helping producers and consumers become more environmentally conscious. Yet there is research that indicates the existence of racial and class divides among individuals who participate in these alternative agri-food programs. Previous research (McGarry, Spittler, & Ahern, 2005; Alkon & McCullen, 2010) has shown that farmers market shoppers and proprietors tended to land on the middle and higher end of the income distribution. The inclusion of people of color in these programs is vital because it makes them more approachable and accessible to individuals in these communities, diversifies the products available, and because it also encourages the white market shoppers to understand the importance that people of color play in the alternative agri-food system (Alkon & McCullen, 2010, p. 951-952). Efforts to branch out to

these communities include special celebrations for culturally-diverse holidays, such as the Mexican *Dia de los Muertos* and Chinese New Year. Alkon & McCullen reveal that communities which have engaged in outreach to ethnically diverse groups have met relative success, but still have a way to go.

United States Food Culture in Popular Media

Depictions of food in advertisements. Popular media plays an intrinsic role in influencing what Americans eat. Whether it be through print, radio, television, or digitally, Americans of all ages, genders, races, and economic statuses are constantly badgered with advertisements for all sorts of food stuffs, restaurants, and grocery stores. Yet these advertisements are not all identical: different social groups are targeted using different tactics, products, and messages. The differences reveal a lot about what are (or are perceived to be) the values, norms, and beliefs of the different groups. Van Drie (2014) examined advertisements for foods, restaurants, and grocery stores in prominent white, black, and Latina women's magazines in order to determine each subculture's attitude towards food and also their wider sets of beliefs and values. Van Drie found that mainstream (white) magazine ads tended to focus on the convenience, nutrition, and health properties of the advertised foods while African American magazine food ads stressed the taste aspect and Latina magazine ads highlighted the importance of family and community. Popular magazines are an important source for women's health information and thus, the advertisements displayed within them and the messages they carry influence the readers' dietary habits; the influence is stronger when readers can explicitly relate and identify with the advertisement. These advertisements also reveal the ways in which traditional food customs are commodified as they are absorbed into the fold of American food culture.

Television and the socialization of children into American food culture. One of the main vectors of socialization for children in the United States has been the television. The prevalence of television in U.S. households has grown significantly from less than ten percent of households in the 1950s to 98 percent by the late 1970s. As these rates grew, so did the time children spent watching television and therefore, the time they spent consuming advertisements. Roseman, Poor, and Stephenson (2014) examined the depictions of food in television programs targeting eleven- to fourteen-year-olds. Their research found that 42 percent of the food-related scenes (FRS) did not meet federal MyPlate nutritional standards and only 24 percent of food were fruits or vegetables. The majority of the foods depicted were snack foods full of empty calories, sugar, and fat. Consistent with the findings of Borzekowski & Robinson (2001) and Story & French (2004), Roseman et al. states that the food choices and eating habits children acquire during this period have profound effect on their long-term tastes and habits. Thus, curtailing the exposure children have to unhealthy food and drink advertisements at a young age would be greatly beneficial in improving their future health outcomes.

Though the 1990 Children's Television Act curtailed the amount of advertisements in children's television programs, researchers found that "it takes only 1 or 2 exposures to a 10- to 30-second food commercial to influence 2- through 6-year-olds' short-term preferences for specific food products" (Borzekowski & Robinson, 2001, p. 45). Food advertisement campaigns targeting young children and adolescents often feature popular cartoon or videogame characters, or giveaways of promotional materials or even extravagant vacations as further incentives to purchase these goods. These short but repeated exposures help foster long-lasting brand awareness in children and encourage product sales. Furthermore, many of these ads are deceptive in nature but are often seen as truthful information by children and adolescents because they

have not fully developed the cognitive skills required to know better. The effects of frequent exposure to deceptive food advertisements are more profound on black and Latino children, which have higher rates of television consumption than white children (Story & French, 2004).

Television exposure can influence a child's eating behaviors and tastes, thus potentially placing them at a higher risk for diet-related illnesses. Yet researchers at Columbia University found that nutrition education programs for parents of young children can help them make better informed choices on what foods they are purchasing for their children, thus positively influencing their future health outcomes (Hindin, Contento, & Gussow, 2004). Additionally, government action can curb the influence junk food commercials has on children by limiting their presence all together. Anderson (2005) found that countries with stricter regulations on food and drink advertising campaigns have been shown to produce lower rates of obesity than countries with more lenient ones. Though the industry has responded that this action would be an infringement on their first amendment right, Graff et al. (2012) shows that judicial precedent excludes "inherently misleading" commercial speech from these protections. Roseman et al. (2014) have also suggested that media companies and regulatory agencies can learn from historical depictions of tobacco in television programming, noting that portrayals of tobacco became more stigmatized and less commonplace as the public became increasingly aware of the public health dangers of smoking. Likewise, depictions of unhealthy and innutritious foods/beverages in television—particularly, children's television—can also be progressively phased out and replaced with portrayals of healthier alternatives. The popular children's television show *Sesame Street*, for example, has been lauded for its portrayals of characters eating healthy foods and participating in physical activities (Kotler, Schiffman, & Hanson, 2012).

Conclusion

The complexity and intricacy of American food culture is therefore its most defining feature, but examining *how* it came to be is just as important. The absence of birthright nobility and aristocracy in the United States combined with its relatively young age as a country created somewhat of a cultural vacuum. Cultural trends were generally established by the rich, but *who* the rich were varied from region to region. Thus, the industrial magnates in the Northern United States created a different cultures and traditions than the plantation owners in the Southern United States. These differences came head-to-head during the Civil War, where they obstructed attempts to create a unified national identity and thereby a unified national food culture. Food culture also varied from region to region due to an availability of different resources, ingredients, and climates as well as the incorporation of traditions and customs of different indigenous and immigrant culture which inhabit the region. One common feature, however, is the attempts to better individuals or society through their dietary habits. These attempts have often been laden with religious and/or scientific allusions, with religious leaders, popular figures, or pseudoscientists spurring the movements. In more recent times, media advertisements have used the same age-old tactics to get people to buy their products, often having to resort

The importance of autonomy and freedom in our national ethos is clear and influences American eating habits. Americans increasingly eat alone, whether out of necessity or desire, and they increasingly eat outside the house, often at fast food restaurants. Government regulations aimed at promoting healthier diets are seen as restricting our choices and personal liberties and are thus generally approached wearily by both politicians and the general public. The prevailing national ideology of individualism and self-determination relegates obesity, heart disease, and other diet related illnesses as personal, individual issues rather than public health epidemics. In

doing so, it impedes the effectiveness of public policy in addressing these issues and helps absolve the manufacturers of unhealthy foods and drinks of responsibility for their actions. Counting on the food, agriculture, and advertising industries to self-regulate their practices has not worked as well as many had hoped, as they often lack the motivation or enforcement mechanisms and have goals that do not comply with the recommendations of dietary and nutrition groups. Public pressure and popular trends influence the behaviors of these industries, but the impact is usually limited in scope.

However, governmental policy can and has been successfully utilized to improve American dietary habits. Agricultural subsidies encourage the overproduction of certain crops while discouraging the production of other crops which may be healthier and more nutritious alternatives. Reforming this system could lead to a diversification of crops and could help local farmers flourish. Public policy can also limit the deceptive advertisements shown to children, help consumers make better dietary choices through improved food and drink labelling, and also assist with alternative agri-food programs such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture. Unfortunately, the involvement of money in politics also leaves public policy susceptible to corporate agri-food interests, rendering public health concerns a mere afterthought. This is where grassroots community action has the biggest potential. Farmers markets, community gardens, community support agriculture, and other alternative agri-food programs have been shown to improve the livelihoods of both food consumers and producers. In participating communities, these approaches have improved individual dietary habits and health outcomes, have fostered a stronger sense of community, and have also increased the environmental and social consciousness of participants. However, there exists a clear race and class divide among communities in where these alternative agri-food programs exist. These

communities tend to be whiter and have significantly higher incomes, but efforts to incorporate diverse ethnicities into existing programs and expanding them to areas which do not have them have proven successful thus far. It is important to involve people of color and working class and impoverished people into these agri-food alternatives because they are the groups that are the most adversely affected by inadequate food access and diet-related illnesses.

Despite our analysis, we were unable to come up with a concise definition of American food culture. However, we can develop still develop a general framework of what American food culture is and what it represents about the United States based on the axioms of American food history, public and agricultural policy, public health, and mass media. American food culture is one that is amorphous. It treasures its convenient, cheap, and energy-dense foods, yet also worries about its health and attempts to better itself through its eating. It embraces the uniformity of Chipotle and McDonald's, though it also loves exploring new ingredients and fusion cuisine. It lavishes the choice and expedience provided by big box supermarkets but enjoys shopping at the local and environmentally friendly farmers market. It is adamant about its independence and self-determination while allowing its dietary preferences to be guided by less-than-truthful food and beverage companies.

There are, however, several areas where current research can and must improve. The amount of data required to make an analysis of food access in impoverished and rural communities is astronomical and complex. Current research into food access is insufficient and that more studies need to be conducted to better determine the ways in which food access affects consumption patterns as well as the mental and physical well-being of individuals living in food deserts. The impact of food, health, and nutrition policies enacted under the Obama administration have also yet to fully quantified, a task made increasingly difficult due to

President Trump's own contradictory policies. This paper also did not thoroughly discuss the physical activity component of diet-related illnesses, nor the increasing privatization of school lunches. It also only briefly discusses the component that capitalism has played in shaping American food and dietary habits, a subject that requires more attention. Rather than being a conclusive and definite say on the matter, this paper hopefully served as a thorough introductory overview on the complex, multidisciplinary topic of American food culture and will spur future, more specific research on the subject in years to come.

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