

Matthias Vorhauer
Matricula Number: 2549142
Markus Nowatzki
Matricula Number: 2595261
University of Technology, Dresden

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Eating in America

A Cultural Survey

A GLC Project Paper
Tutor and Guide: David Hintz
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“There is no American food.

When we begin to list American foods, either we talk about regional things like lobster or shrimp Creole, or we talk about spaghetti and pizza and hot dogs...

One could argue it's what makes us great. The fact that we don't have a cuisine is a measure of our democracy and of our ethnic heterogeneity.”

Sidney Mintz, Anthropologist

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II Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that the United States is a country with a huge impact on the world. Based on its economic power and military strength, America is one of the leaders of mankind, thus not only does it influence the political scene but the culture of foreign countries as well. Throughout the Western hemisphere “the American way of eating” has especially become a symbol for hip and trendy food. American-style cooking represents the food of youth culture. Moreover, it is the food of people who are fond of America, who might want to preserve their vacation memories, or taste the “American dream.” American food is fast and easy to prepare, full of sweet calories, and it has a uniform taste. Furthermore, it is considered unhealthy and often unjustly referred to as “trash food.” These prejudices are part of the picture most Europeans have when it comes to food from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Despite preconceived opinions about its quality and nutritional value, American food is present everywhere in Germany these days: in countless news reports, throughout the media, and especially in colorful advertising campaigns. Among these are major famous brands, both “native” American and their German counterparts, including familiar names such as Häagen Dasz Ice Cream, Coca Cola, McDonald’s, Pepsi, Burger King, and many more. Within the last ten years it has also become fairly common to buy an increasing number of products related to America in German food stores and supermarkets. Among these products are instant hamburgers, milkshakes, American pizza, various dips and sauces, and even American sweets, e.g. Hershey’s chocolate and marshmallows. Looking closely at this development, Germany is one of the countries with a largely Americanized market, where many young people seem to crave for anything American, including food and fashion. Still, the pure presence of American food and the tiny bits of culture we catch in the media do not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the subject. Although most Germans are convinced they know more than enough about American food (and they are right in their own, somewhat limited perspective), they only scratch the surface of the idea. What they do know to a great extent are clichés and prejudices, and most “youngsters” have not had any personal experience with American culture at all. In fact, sometimes the food served in Germany as “truly American” might not be American at all.

Clarifying this misinformation is the central motive upon which our project, “Eating in America,” is based upon.

Before we start our investigation, we would like to introduce our two basic theses:

- **1st**: There exists a rich culture in the United States with too many fascinating facets to allow people to be misled by preconceived opinions.
- **2nd**: Eating culture is an important part of America's multi ethnic society, and can without doubt serve as a mirror of today's America ("you are what you eat"- theory).

In the first place, the act of eating is merely a necessity to survive. Yet, it is more than that. As in any civilization worldwide, food culture also plays an important role for the American way of life. All nations significantly express their cultural identity through the food they prepare and the way they enjoy it. This includes traditions handed down from the historic past as well as typical ingredients of the area, merged to form a unique cooking style: it reflects a hidden but powerful entity we would like to call the soul of a region or country. People are proud of their heritage, they like to show it, share it with each other, and preserve their traditions. Naturally, food belongs in this category as well. But it grows still more interesting. When people reside in a certain area long enough, generation after generation, they are interconnected with invisible links – they share the same background, the same feelings, sometimes even the same views of life. We are certain that vital parts of culture can be found in the food people eat, showing outsiders who they are and where they come from. One could say that their eating habits define them in a way similar to the way a haircut expresses an individual's personality.

All this applies to American cuisine as well, which is as complex and multinational as society itself. Since American food is so often considered to be one-sided and unhealthy, so we aim to look upon this subject from a different point of view than the usual clichés and prejudices that frequently go together with this term. We are well-aware that the range of the idiom "American food" is at least as wide as the state of Texas. Nevertheless, we would like to contemplate American eating culture from a different perspective than is usually the case throughout Germany and Europe. We want to find out how prejudices against American food have developed in the past and are still developing. Finally, we want to compile everything we experienced during our stay in the US to gain a comprehensive picture so as to show what we understand by the term "American food." The main idea here is to provide Europeans with a better understanding for and an entertaining view at this seemingly well-understood but still foreign culture.

An American cook put it this way: "... after cooking French, Italian, Chinese, and other dishes I started asking myself, Exactly what is American Food? I knew it wasn't hot dogs, Big Macs, and take-out chicken."¹

III Culture makes a difference

Different countries, different customs – this is what people use to say in Germany, and certainly they are right. People in our country (especially the younger ones) do not consider US culture to be that foreign, if they regard it as culture at all. Several reasons are responsible for this odd attitude, with today's mass media in the first line of battle. Despite this fact, we have had a completely different experience. Agreed; at first sight the idea of America having a comparable culture to Germany seems obvious, and since both are located in the Western hemisphere, it does have many similarities indeed. However, with a closer view on the subject we could hardly think of anything more different in terms of people's attitudes and their particular ethnic background. "The American way of life," if not taken as a hollow phrase, depicts a few pieces of this unfamiliar concept. Unfamiliar it is, but it is also a whole new fascinating world to explore, and maybe we can find a little assistance in order to support our cause. We would not be surprised at all if local food helped us to illustrate what America is all about, at least to a certain degree.

III.1 On today's distinctions

It is not uncommon for Europeans to have some reservations about American food and American lifestyle in particular. Quite a few visitors who have been to average fast-food places that are regarded as American (the inevitable example here is McDonald's and other fast-food chains), believe they cannot expect any more. This kind of food looks the same, has the same flavor, and although it might be of a certain quality, you can simply taste that it is just a commercial product with no other ambition than to inexpensively feed its customers. Additionally, America does not increase its food reputation when it mostly provides tourists with the same meals they already know. Of course, everything depends on convenience. Unless they go for something special outside major tourist areas, for instance Mexican, Chinese cuisine, a barbecue, or seafood, the food provided seems almost identical to each other or even worse: it appears to be interchangeable. It is merely impossible to taste whether you are on the Atlantic Coast or in the Midwest if one does not leave the well-beaten path of most tourists.

¹ Blunt, Richard: American Food. In: *Backwoods Home Magazine*
Source: <http://www.backwoodshome.com/articles/blunt30.html>

We do not think it is necessary to name all of the prejudices German citizens have in their mind when they think of American food. Revealingly enough, most of the people who helped us answering our German questionnaire were convinced that the typical examples of American food we gave them were essentially true.² Among these fast-food, cornflakes and barbecue scored the most points for being familiar. On the other hand, modern American cuisine would not be the same without its famous salad bars and its variety of exquisite dressings. Whether you like blue cheese with your salad or extra olives - just go ahead and help yourself! Interestingly, almost no German took the chance to tick the option “salads” on our questionnaire. But the worst is yet to come: on a scale from one to five (one = very healthy, five = totally unhealthy) they decided American food was rather unhealthy (four / five).³ When asked for the reason for their choice, most arguments dealt with the increasing influence of fast-food on modern life, and with the fact of widespread obesity in the United States. In several interviews with friends in Germany, we found out what the picture of American food looks like in the minds of most Germans. Didn't we tell you it had a bad reputation? Negative characteristics such as: “it contains too much fat, calories, cholesterol, sugar, and in general I think American food is a more or less unhealthy nutrition,” cannot be the only reason for a different sense of taste. Naturally such statements have to be taken into consideration, but apparently there is one big mistake in this concept of American food. You can't take a part of the image for the whole, which seems to be the usual mistake if one does not have sufficient information about the subject. Our interview partners who had not been to the US before did know about fast-food, cookies, all sorts of sweets and other products that are available on the German market, and that are declared to be “American.” What most of them were not aware of is the kind of food that is found on many American tables, for example corn on the cob, cornbread, baked beans, several vegetables (okra, yams, squash, sweet potatoes), and other simple items of daily life. Looking at these results, we understood what the explanation for most prejudices and misjudgments is: a lack of information and experience with the real subject, which is crucial for a better comprehension of American food culture.

III.2 Historical reasons for the bad reputation of American food

The further we delved into the course of our investigation, the more another question started to bother us. Couldn't it be possible that there were historical reasons, as well, to explain the often-negative attitude Europeans possess towards American food and culture in general? Surely this

² cf. questionnaire (German Questionnaire, IIA, p.16.)

³ cf. questionnaire (German Questionnaire, IIBScale, p. 3.)

intolerance did not come out of the blue. All prejudices that exist in people's minds today took a long time to develop, and obviously it was a constant process that had begun the very day the first British colonists started to feel as Americans centuries ago. Since that day, influenced by millions of immigrants, the former colonies have developed their own traditions and values.

In the very beginning, most parts of Northern America were new, wild, and mostly unexplored land. Native Americans, trappers, fur traders, settlers, and all sorts of adventurers roamed the wide prairies trying to make a living. Early America was a place where Darwin's law of "the survival of the fittest" played a very important role in the building of the nation. Meanwhile, the old world looked suspiciously, sometimes arrogantly and condescendingly upon the people in this new land, people who had left their home countries because of limited chances to survive. At that time, America was simply not taken seriously, and its food seemed to be no match for European cuisine. The nutrition of the first settlers was rather simple, containing mostly the prevailing produce of the respective region including the holy trinity of Native American cuisine - corn, beans, and squash. Since most of the settlers in the eastern part of America came from England and the English colonies, the only seasonings available reflected the English taste. Additionally, this choice of pepper, mace, clove, and ginger was only available to the wealthiest.

For the most part, food in the New World could, at its best, only be considered as fair and unimaginative. It was not until the first French and Spanish influences that American cooking lost part of its bad reputation.

III.3 Modern media and public opinion

Today, there is hardly any device with a greater influence on people's views and opinions than the mass media. All the time we have incredibly huge amounts of information at hand, sometimes even too much to adequately cope with all issues. As if news, reports, and documentaries of all sorts were not enough, we are also flooded with loud and colorful advertisements. The picture young people have of American food is especially affected by an image which is more often superficial than revealing of the truth. TV commercials, many movies and TV shows only present a very limited and narrow reflection of a broader cultural diversity. We are not saying that the prejudices many Germans have towards American food only exist due to the fault of the media, but it may help to explain its origins.

Interestingly, the influence of the media differs from generation to generation. Our questionnaires and interviews in Germany exposed a few interesting facts concerning that

matter.⁴ For the younger people (the borders of age groups are fluent, so when we talk about “young people,” we include teenagers as well as people in their twenties and early thirties) the United States is typically referred to as “a cool place,” and they have the feeling that its cultural aspects are somehow familiar. Many of them have been in the US before, they speak English, and they are able to use new technologies such as the Internet to acquire information about any topic they might be interested in. Still, the larger group did not have any first hand experience with American culture. They rely on information delivered through the media and their knowledge obtained by encountering examples of American food in Germany. Therefore, their vision of the subject is slightly limited and oftentimes we see the term “American food” reduced to the inevitable fast-food products and other easily available goods. In turn, many older people who do not have the time, or are not willing to use modern media that frequently, are much more unfamiliar with the subject and sometimes don’t have a conception of the matter at all.

IV Food and culture

At first glance, the concept of nutrition seems to contain very few or no cultural aspects at all. You eat when you are hungry, and you eat the food that is available. We are well aware of this, and we also know that most people just eat what they are used to, and usually they do not think about it in daily life. But our approach to the subject of American food is not that simple. There are strong links between food and culture. In a way, we could argue that American food is a vital part of American culture. It is culturally influenced and, in turn, influences American culture itself. This culture is expressed through eating habits, a specific heritage, and certain rituals of eating. To better illustrate our approach to the area in discussion, we should have a look at the following example: the same people who do not care about their daily nutrition rapidly change their attitude when a holiday draws near and it is time again for a family feast. Just think of the complex rituals of eating and cooking performed at celebrations such as Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Food is culture.

IV.1 American eating habits

When we were first developing our fundamental theses as the basis of our forthcoming project, we felt that our positive attitude towards American food was essentially closer to the truth than the common prejudices. In theory, our unique approach to the issue was clear, but we also

⁴ cf. questionnaire (German Questionnaire, IIC, p. 17.)

needed first hand proof. Before we went to the US to collect material, interview “native eaters,” take pictures, and experience American food and culture ourselves, we realized it would be virtually impossible to cover the whole United States during our investigation. For this reason we finally decided to limit our expedition to selected territories, which we could take as samples for our investigation. We are positive that our choices, Midwest and East Coast, are well suited as examples of American living and cuisine.

Both regions differ from each other in numerous aspects and have a long tradition in preparing unique and special regional dishes. Seafood dominates the diet on the coast, while the vast rural areas in the Midwest feed upon the almost endless resources of the soil. The cultural diversity of the United States can be explicitly shown in the Midwest and at the East Coast, and that is what we intended to do. Not only is it our aim to describe the current situation, but we also want to show how food and culture are linked. For us, eating habits are expressions of culture, and we are going to prove that the distinctiveness of American tradition is reflected in its food.

Yet, another important point should be mentioned before we continue to talk about our experiences. There is no “all-American taste” that applies to the whole country. Too many ethnic groups settled in America, transplanting cooks and food traditions from many European and Asian nations. Soon the first New World regional specialties with Old World roots were created: Moravian cookies in North Carolina, Swedish coffee bread in Minnesota, Swiss cheeses in Wisconsin. German populated areas of Wisconsin and Illinois with their spectacular sausage repertoire inspired the creation of Sheboygan bratwurst and Chicago-style hot dogs.

In the 19th century, tastes throughout America had become expressions of local tradition. Ever since, one has only been able to make very few generalizations about American food from coast to coast. Knowing this, it is obvious that the only possible way to talk about the cuisine is region by region.

IV.1.1 Midwest

The States from north to south, from the Great Lakes to the southern borders of Missouri, between the rivers of the Mississippi and the Missouri are also referred to as the Midwest, which is subdivided into the industrial and the agricultural Midwest. In spite of the fact that the area also has some large industrial centers, such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and Minneapolis, the latter of which is more northerly, it is the agricultural heartland of the United States of America. The climate considerably varies from North to South, and consequently agricultural conditions differ as well. Driving through the states of Missouri and Iowa, which are located more in the

south, endless fields of corn and other major crops stretch out far behind the horizon. At the wayside, farmers try to sell the yield from their harvest. The stands are filled with the products of their crops: vegetables and fruit of almost every kind. Corn, squash, and potatoes - the trinity of American crops catches our eyes. Although industrial centers have become more predominant in the north, agriculture still plays a significant role, that is to say that the Midwest still is an important producer, if not the most important producer, of soy. Large cattle ranches occupy the northern grasslands and also the western part of Missouri close to the state of Kansas.

Nowhere does America seem to be more American than in the Midwest. It appears that here the protestant values of hard work and earning money still count, agriculture flourishes, whereas industrial cities have only risen during the last 100 years. Midwestern people appear to be distant at first, yet they are open-minded. Their warm hospitality is well-known, and their rich cuisine, Southern and Western, tasty and plenty, on loaded tables goes along with this.

IV.1.1.1 Barbecue in K.C.

Kansas City, the old capital of the moving west, which once was a typical frontier city, is in a way still lying on the frontier today, representing one of the great centers of barbecue cooking. There are about forty barbecue places listed in the phonebook, and these are probably only the best known ones. Browsing through the Yellow Pages of Kansas City, it is hard to decide where to go for a satisfying meal. Kansas City's barbecue cooks compete in a hot race to become the most wanted barbecue place. It goes without saying that the winner is the guest. Since 1908, when Henry Perry started his place at 19th & Highland, selling a slab for 25 cents each, Kansas City has merged the ways of southern and western barbecue and thus has become famous in its own peculiar way.



One of the original K.C. hickory barbecue ovens.

Southern traditional barbecue sauce is a mix of peppers in a bottle of vinegar. Texans take tomatoes as a base, thin it with Worcester sauce and vinegar, and add lots of hot peppers. Kansas City sauce, however, takes the best of both, using a thick tomato base and adding Worcestershire plus vinegar; by doing so a wonderful delicious sauce develops. While Texans swear that their beef is unbeatable, and while the Carolinians use pork in their sauce, in Kansas City they cook everything that “moves on four legs.”

Although it is possible to order chicken in any barbecue restaurant, Mr. Ghasemi, the founder of Smokehouse Barbecue, is of the opinion that anyone starting his KC barbecue experience⁵ should eat ribs or beef. As a side dish coleslaw and French fries are ordered. It is best to choose ribs to experience a real “chin-dripping, sticky fingers” barbecue. There are hamburgers as well, but hamburgers are commonplace and do not transfer the real excitement, no matter how convenient they might be.

We also had our Kansas City barbecue experience when Janice, our temporary host, took us to one of the many places where barbecue is cooked in Kansas City. Coming closer to the restaurant we could already see the chimney smoking, and in fact, the barbecue should always be prepared in a pit of hickory. Here the pit was more of a stacked affair, where the big hickory logs were slowly burning under many levels filled with meat, while the temperature of the fire was controlled with water. Temperature and timing are decisive for the quality of the meat. However, our meat was great and so was our barbecue experience.



Hickory fire gives the meat its special taste.

IV.1.1.2 Rural life of the Ozarks, hillbillies, hunting and fishing

About three hours drive south of Kansas City the Ozark Mountains open their beautiful forests and lake areas, where many communities still keep their folk traditions alive. Hunting and fishing are still the main spare time occupation of the very friendly locals, whose families settled down more than a generation ago. In most cases they are of Irish, English, or German descent. Settlement has brought many changes to this rugged scene, where dammed up streams now form numerous beautiful lakes. The rugged area of the mountain range, not suitable for extensive agriculture, is one of the poorer areas of Missouri, traditionally characterized by family-owned farms. Many of these families were only hooked up to electricity after WWII, as Ann and Bill



A typical Midwestern meal.

⁵ cf. interview with Mr. Ghasemi.

Bates, our hosts, told us. This could be the reason why traditions were highly regarded in those days; bad tongues, of course, used to talk of Hillbillies, an abusive term depicting people living in remote areas. Apart from Blue Grass, a music genre still recalling their Irish descent, food belongs to these traditions, consisting of corn, fish, and meat, which is hunted in the woods. Due to heavy hunting, especially during the great depression in the 1920s, the deer population was literally rendered extinct and was only reintroduced in the 1950s. Today, strict hunting laws provide a basis for a stable population, so that deer still can be hunted. Bill, our host, still belongs to the many enthusiastic hunters who use the hunting season to enrich their meals with fresh meat. The bitter defense of existing gun laws should also be seen in this respect, which allow almost everyone to own a suitable weapon for hunting. Especially in the Ozarks, but also in many other areas, Americans do not only hunt for sport, but also for food.

Crappie fish as well as bass, corn on the cob, and finally sweet apple pie belonged to the dinner that our hosts had prepared for us, when we were invited to talk about life in rural



An all-time American favorite: apple pie with ice cream.

Missouri. The house lying just above the water of the Lake of the Ozarks offered the right atmosphere for storytelling about folks who used to receive their newspaper in their mailboxes together with freshly caught fish, just frozen overnight. After damming up some rivers in the mountains, big artificial lakes were formed, which now provide a living habitat to a variety of fish. Today it is possible to catch more than 50 different species of fish. Along the roads big signs advertise fishing opportunities.

Maybe cakes and pies are not an American invention, but it almost looks like it. We had wonderful sweet apple pie with ice cream, which seems to be an American standard, as one may read in Keruoac’s famous American novel, “On The Road.”⁶

IV.1.1.3 German-American food in the Amana Colonies

Traveling or living in the Midwest, one will surely recognize the many German names in phone books, newspaper advertising, or while reading the business signs. That is not without reason, because about 50 million Americans are of German descent. Therefore, they form the largest group of immigrants⁷ in the United States, whereas the Midwest and Pennsylvania seem to be

⁶ Kerouac, Jack: On the road. p. 14: “I went to sit in the bus station and think this over. I ate another apple pie and ice cream; that’s practically all I ate all across the country, I knew it was nutritious and it was delicious, of course.”

⁷ It’s important to note that the successors of German immigrants are not an ethnic group as for instance the Italian or Chinese. German Americans are widely regarded as assimilated and are not even officially recognized as an ethnic group. Nevertheless, the German influence on American culture can still be felt.

the largest centers of immigration. These settlers are a perfect example of how closely food and culture are connected. German-American food can be found in countless restaurants, however, for a real German-American experience we traveled to the Amana Colonies in Iowa, about 30 miles west of Iowa City, crossed by highway 151 and 220. These colonies were founded by a group of German immigrants from Hessen looking for religious freedom when the large wave of immigration took place in the 1850s.

German-American food cannot deny its roots, but it has become Americanized to a great extent. Of course, what Americans notice as German food is mostly Western German, if not Bavarian. The reason in this can be found in the origins of settlement and in the reason that the largest sector of post-World War Germany is Bavaria. Emigration from Germany mostly originated in Hessen, the Rhineland, and Bavaria. Today, we find their heritage in the food of German Americans; recipes have been handed down from generation to generation, esp. in Amish and Mennonite groups. Beer breweries have been established by Germans, food names have been added to the language, such as sauerkraut, brats (bratwurst), liverwurst, and many more.

However, what we wanted to find out is: What distinguishes German-American food from other American food, what makes it different from genuine German food? German food usually revolves around meat, which is reflected by the main dish of the day, where almost always meat or sausages in various kinds are served. This is true for many areas where Germans have settled and their heritage is remembered. Hence, we find the art of special marinading and adding fruit to the meat in the Amanas as well. Of course it has been adapted, so you can have German style turkey in some restaurants of the area.

What is true for meat can be applied to baking as well. Although much sweeter (Americans seem to use about two thirds more sugar than Germans), in many Amana bakeries we have found German style cakes and pies. As we learned from the locals, every bakery creates its own style of rhubarb pie – unfortunately, we were not able to taste any because it wasn't rhubarb season. What we tasted was very sweet German American pie and lots of coffee. Just as I have said before, it appears that Americans use much more sugar than Germans. In our experience this is true for coffee as well.



European style wooden windmill in the Amana colonies, Iowa.

IV.1.1.4 Holes in the Wall, Greasy Spoons, Coffeeshops and Donuts - Breakfast in America

On our last day with Janice, our host, we started the morning in one of those little places called “Greasy Spoons” or “Holes in the Wall.” These are very small cafes, restaurants, truckstops, or diners, which often start out as coffee-and-sandwich places, but have become popular for serving a hearty breakfast as well. Very often one may order the typical Midwestern rural mashed potatoes with gravy there, as well as pancakes with maple syrup – we took both, just for the experience. Janice told us that mashed potatoes, gravy and dressing⁸ – the latter of which is a kind of bread made out of corn – is very typical for the Midwest. It has been the food for farmers and blue-collar workers and is served with turkey at Thanksgiving. As a side dish once again one may have coleslaw. Therefore I would suggest that this dish – turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy and dressing, is not only a typical American one, but THE American.

American Pancakes belong to the major family of pancakes, plinij, crepe, or whatever one might call them. Typically, American pancakes are served with maple syrup, which is made out of sugar taken from Canadian maple trees. The number of pancake recipes cannot be counted since the basic recipe has a great deal of variations, such as milk replaced by butter milk, in some cases baking powder is added to make them more fluffy; one may add raisins, blueberries, sour cream or any other condiment to the basic dough.

IV.1.1.5 St Louis - Home of beer

St. Louis is not only a city with a rich cultural heritage, founded by French settlers, a center of sports activities as St. Louis Cardinals baseball, but it is also the home of another important part of culture, of American culture with Germanic heritage. No other kind of drink has gained such importance in American lifestyle like beer, not only as a beverage, but also through its name, through sponsorship, through Hollywood. No other drink, not even hard liquor, has drawn such an attention of American anti-alcoholic movements. Beer of all



St Louis' most famous landmark: the Gateway Arch, a gigantic memorial dedicated to westward expansion.

⁸ Not to be mistaken with the sauce that comes with salads, this one is bread.

kinds and flavors belongs to the top alcoholic beverage throughout the USA. In order to explore this development and have a few free drinks, we decided to visit the famous Anheuser-Busch brewery.

In 1852, German immigrant George Schneider founded one of the many breweries throughout the Midwest, the Bavarian Brewery. Like so many other Germans he brought with him a long brewing tradition rooted in Bavaria, southern Germany. A few years later, Eberhard Anheuser acquired the Bavarian Brewery and thus laid the foundation for one of the largest breweries in the world. Today, Anheuser-Busch sells more than 100 million barrels per year worldwide.⁹ The tour through the old and new parts of the brewery gave us interesting insights into the brewing process, about which we learned - although it is not very much different from German brewing - that it varies in some important details. After the tour we had the opportunity to taste some of the different brands of beer.

It is very interesting to see that some important details in brewing can make a whole different beer taste. It should be remembered that Americans do not have a “purity statement” comparable to the so-called “Reinheitsgebot” in Germany, so it is possible that rice and other



The common way of delivering beer in the old day: a horse carriage.

grains are also used to complement the taste. However, the "Reinheitsgebot" is not the only difference between European and American beers. While American beers range over many kinds of flavor and cultural influences, German influence remains especially strong, not only due to beer names (Lager), but also because of the brewing process. American beer is served much colder than German beer. As we have also learned, in most American beers carbon dioxide,

which is produced during fermentation, is removed and stored. Later, the gas is recombined with the beer suds, and even artificial carbon dioxide is added. Therefore American beer stays crystal clear and keeps its crown of foam even when served much colder. The second aspect is that the adding of artificial carbon dioxide increases the storage life of beer, whereas German beer should be consumed within six weeks. Only German export beer is pasteurized for storage. Another aspect of taste is the kind of hops which is used. European hops is very expensive, so many American breweries use the more inexpensive Californian and Texan hops or even hops syrup.

⁹ Source: <http://www.anheuser-busch.com/history/events.html>

IV.1.2 East Coast

As in other parts of the United States, a regional East Coast cuisine emerged when the mostly English settlers were forced to modify their culinary traditions to suit the local climate.



Farm-fresh sweet corn – a basic ingredient for many delicious dishes.

Interestingly, the first lessons the settlers learned came from Native Americans - people who had formed healthy civilizations which nurtured themselves off the bounty of the land long before Europeans set foot on American soil. During that early period of American immigration, Native American cuisine consisted of a far more balanced and healthier diet than the food of the colonists. The settlers

had arrived with European food prejudices and therefore ate a considerably more bland diet than Native Americans. On Indian menus one could find more than 2,000 foods, and since the land turned out to be stocked with rich ingredients, the settlers soon developed dishes with regional flavor, such as the English boiled and baked puddings that, made with cornmeal, became “Indian” puddings.¹⁰ Today, corn, beans, and squash can be found on almost every American table.

Although the settlers did not easily give up the holiday meals they loved, they learned how to adapt the old recipes to new ingredients. A typical New England example for this evolution is clam chowder. Littleneck clams are so plentiful in coastal areas that they were an obvious choice for chowder that would have simmered with haddock and cod back home in England. The simple, sturdy foods of the Northeast reflect more than any other the English origins of the country. Meats and vegetables imported from the homeland merged with local ingredients such as turkey, maple syrup, lobster, clams, cranberries, and always corn to provide delicious specialties such as Indian pudding, Boston brown bread, clam chowder, and Maine boiled lobster.



The bounty of the land – basis for a healthy nutrition.

¹⁰ cf. Waverley Root & Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America: a history*.

The New England states are the oldest in the federation and their cultural life is based upon a long tradition. Native American influences merged with the style of cooking that came with the first English settlers, the Puritans and Quakers. In general, there are no such vast cornfields here as in the Midwest, but compared to Germany the still largely rural areas supply the market with the important regional agricultural produce. Together with fresh seafood they form the ingredients the daily diet is based upon in most families. These simple, but fresh ingredients are often prepared in a simple, adequate way, which preserves much of the original taste and vitamins.

IV.1.2.1 A typical East Coast family dinner

In the little town of Danvers, near Boston, Massachusetts, we had the great opportunity to be the guest of our friend Amy, who invited us to share a typical East Coast dinner with the family.

Again, it is the little things that ultimately make a difference. Worth mentioning here are a few small, but nonetheless remarkable cultural distinctions. While in Germany the evening meal is usually served cold, consisting of sliced meat, cheese and bread, many Americans prefer a warm dinner.¹¹ Furthermore, it is the main meal of the day, taken early in the evening. Usually, the whole family comes together to eat and discuss the events of the day. To most people, these little distinctions might not even be worth pointing out. But I think it reveals a fact of some importance: due to other working and living conditions, Americans have a different structure of daily routine, resulting in different eating habits.

But there is at least one more remarkable tradition that takes place even before you start to eat. As on the East Coast, it is a widespread custom in many American families to have a short prayer just before the meal, thanking The Lord for the food provided. America is known to be a country where people take religion (all kind of religions) rather seriously – and of course this circumstance is also reflected in the rituals that go together with the act of eating. Since we have had similar experiences on several occasions, we believe that the prayer before a meal also shows what an important role religion plays in America, and what a great impact it has on daily life.

According to my hosts, there is no typical “American food,” and we are positive they are right. The kind of food depends very much on the region. Our example of a typical East Coast dinner consisted of sweet baked potatoes, corn on the cob with liquid butter, and green salad. Instead of meat we had steamed salmon with lemon juice, and as a dessert a very American “chocolate-chip peanut butter ice cream.” Except for the latter, this meal was healthy food,

¹¹ cf. questionnaire (American Questionnaire, ICWW, p. 7, and German Questionnaire, ICWW & ICWE, p. 8f.)

proving a serious prejudice wrong. While some people on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean might not care about their nutrition at all, many Americans are very conscious of what they eat, and try to keep a balanced diet. After all, we can see no harm in a few scoops of ice cream.

Due to the fact that the United States is so huge and the various States are so different, it is no surprise that prejudices against each other's food have a long tradition in the US as well. Every region is proud of its heritage, and all are confident their way of preparing food is the best. While many Midwesterners are scared off only by the appearance of seafood, quite a few people from the East Coast are convinced that the food in the West and in the South is much too heavy to be reasonably nutritious, resulting in serious health problems. Especially in rural areas where people are used to eating heavy dishes, obesity is one of the major problems. In contrast, fitness is the keyword that applies to the big cities where people of all ages are used to running and exercising on a regular basis.

IV.1.2.2 The Cape Cod experience

In our personal perception, there is hardly any place more suitable to experience typical seafood than on Cape Cod. While the whole East Coast offers its great resources of the Atlantic Ocean, the seafood of Cape Cod is among to the best in the country, and what's more, the whole variety of seafood can be found on the Cape. It does not matter if you crave clam chowder, lobster, shrimp, oysters, or crab cake – almost everything that swims or grows in the sea is available.



Freshly harvested clams. Little Pleasant Bay, Cape Cod, MA.



Fresh clams are served with lemon juice.

Being the guest of our friend Mark Zivan, we had the unique opportunity to spend a whole day working on a mussel farm, experiencing sea life, and interviewing him about American food and seafood in particular. At last, after harvesting and culling the clams, we tried one of them raw. For us, the taste of a freshly harvested clam represents all seafood is about. First of all, it is fresh (it is most important that seafood has to be served as fresh as possible), low fat, and of course it is salty by nature, reflecting the taste of the sea itself.

While working, we also discussed some interesting issues concerning American food. Again, we came to the conclusion that American food differs from region to region, and that it is almost impossible to bring all of the diversity of ethnic foods together under one big roof labeled as “American food.” However, there is still something special which is common to all foods in the US. It is typically American to literally suck up all different kinds of food and add them to American cuisine, hereby also adapting ethnic foods to the American spectrum of taste. Dozens of ethnic cuisines such as Mexican, Chinese, Italian, French, and many more are available in America, and it is evident that most “classic” recipes of foreign cuisines have been altered over the time. As soon as a new ethnic food arrives on the American table, chefs start to modify it to suit the taste of the Americans.

It has to be considered that food is always linked with traditions. For example, on the East Coast a clambake is almost an institution, and a picnic on the beach is more than just consuming food. The people gather to eat and socialize, which makes clambakes or picnics perfect examples for the social component of eating.



Picnic on Nauset Beach. Lobster, grilled corn on the cob, and noodle salad make a delicious dinner.

IV.1.2.3 Eating in Amish Country

Although the Amish in the area of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, are not located directly on or near the Atlantic coast, they still contributed a great deal to “American” food. They are a perfect



Traditional Amish farm house in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

example of alteration of food, of mingling old recipes with new ingredients. The fact that the old-order Amish still live like their ancestors more than one hundred years ago shows even more clearly the transition of nutrition from the ways of the Old World to the New World.

The Amish, who came from Switzerland, have preserved many old ways of preparing food. Most Amish do not have any electricity in their homes. Sometimes exceptions are made when necessary for business. For cooking, many use either wood or kerosene oil

stoves. They cool their food in ice-boxes, spring-houses, or their basements. Only a minority have freezers, mostly powered by diesel generators. The Amish prepare most of their food from



Amish farm products.

scratch, but some also use mixes and instant foods. They preserve all of their own fruits and vegetables and much of their meat by canning. Many rural families have their own milk cow and make cheese, cottage cheese, yoghurt, and ice cream. Those who live near urban areas usually buy these items at the supermarket or cheese houses. Many farm families eat cornmeal mush - made from oven-roasted field corn - for breakfast. Eggs and cooked cereal are other typical breakfast-foods. Fruits or juice

may be included. The main meal of the day typically consists of noodles, macaroni, or potatoes; meat, which is often fried; and canned vegetables.

IV.1.2.4 A few words on fast-food

It is impossible to talk about American food without at least mentioning fast-food. This part of American eating culture has been around since the early 1920s when the first hamburger chains (White Castle) started to provide America with its soon-to-become dominant food. These companies also taught the American people a new and different way to eat, leading to many changes in American culture and lifestyle. It was a question of marketing to promote a product which was considered disreputable and undesirable (1921) to an accepted mainstream food that Americans quickly added to their daily diet. Some even regard the hamburger as America's most ethnic food, and if this is not true, the hamburger is at least a symbol of American food recognized world wide.¹²



Today, fast-food restaurants can be found everywhere. Mc Donald's in China Town, New York City.

There are a few slight differences between fast-food culture in the US and in Germany, where mostly young people regularly eat in fast-food restaurants. In contrast, fast-food is much more established in America. Whole families, including members of all generations, join in to go to a fast-food place in order to have a meal. Of course one also has to admit that many prejudices concerning fast-food basically represent the truth. After all, fast-food is not health

¹² cf. David Hogan: Selling 'em by the Sack.

food. It is also true that fast-food does exist and that it is one big part of American food, and we have to accept that fact.

Another misinterpretation is that fast-food is the most frequently eaten food for most families. Most Americans, however, only consume the quick cuisine when traveling or when time is short. Usually, families have regular local food. Very often, young people do not have the opportunity to go to bars or pubs (the legal drinking age in most states is 21), so they like to gather in fast-food restaurants, milk bars, or pizza places.

People outside the US often mistake hamburgers as fast-food by definition. But it is not. A thoroughly prepared homemade hamburger with fresh meat, salad, and corn on the cob cannot be called seriously unhealthy. Even a few regular ingredients can make a difference. Depending on the region, local food always belongs on the table, and sometimes it becomes part of the fast-food experience as well.

V Food and heritage

V.1 History of American food

Most of the time, when people hear the term American food they have fast-food in mind: hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries, and all of the other speedy dishes. Partly they seem to be right. One can hardly fail to notice the influence of fast-food in any Western society saturated with legions of fast-food temples. Nowadays the “fast way of eating” is not only best known for the US - it even has become a symbol for “American-ness.” However, America has created a far more exciting variety of eating culture.

All of the different groups of immigrants that arrived in America have also brought their varieties of food, which have shaped what is known as “American” food now. Besides English and particularly puritan influences, there were also French, Spanish, German, and Italian settlers who not only enriched the American way of life with their specific culture but also contributed diverse eating traditions. While the Spanish influenced Mexican cuisine, the latter developed a great and popular kind of food that spread from the South-West to almost every part of the US. Italy introduced an especially great number of dishes that almost every American would call genuinely made in the US. The former slaves brought in African cooking, and different religious groups, such as the Quakers and the Amish people, tagged part of a food culture with their names. As we can see: Not only is there the overstretched cliché of these hamburger buns, which are very American in a way, but also a whole diversity of other foods and food varieties to discover.

The history of American food begins shortly after Christopher Columbus set his foot on the Island of Guanahani, West Indies, in 1492. His successors, for instance the Spanish Conquistadors of the 16th century, entered a continent which he had believed was India. Of course it was not India, but nevertheless they had encountered not only America's people but also its food. They found tomatoes, potatoes, chilies, corn, beans, and many other vegetables that have "conquered" the tables of the whole world since then. What is now known as Mexican food is a conglomerate of Spanish and Native American dishes. This gathering of two different cultures consists of old Native recipes and new Spanish ways of preparing meat, especially cooking and frying with fat. Examples of this intermingling of Spanish and Native cuisine are tacos, burritos, enchiladas, and tortillas.

About one hundred years later, in the 17th century, the English established their first permanent settlement at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. To keep control over the colonies the English crown founded so-called "joint stock companies" to recruit settlers that were scarce until these companies offered free land for settlers. After this the situation rapidly changed. The new colonies expanded fast and the first tobacco and cotton plantations were established. In order to run these plantations, which were mostly located in the south, the colonists imported the first black slaves. While English settlers were bringing their typically sturdy food with them, they started to blend it with local ingredients, for example turkey, lobster, maple syrup, clams, and almost always corn to provide dishes such as Indian pudding, Boston brown bread, clam chowder, and Maine boiled lobster. The famous story about Native Americans helping English settlers over the winter by showing them the way to use local fauna and flora resounded in the holiday of Thanksgiving and its dinner, which was celebrated for the first time in 1621 and showed how English cuisine was influenced by Indians.

Further in the South people gained advantage from a more moderate climate, which allowed them to use an even greater diversity of vegetables. The food was still English, but appeared more southern in spicing and ways of cooking. African Americans introduced barbecue, all kinds of fritters, and many greens. They also brought with them important techniques, e.g. how to smoke meat, fry greens, and make spicy sauces. They played an important role in molding English, African, and Native American cooking into what is known as Southern Cuisine today – simply, because they were the servants in Southern kitchens.

What would an American ball game be without a hot dog? Well, Germans have introduced a whole lot of ways to make sausages, and the fact that they moved into the Midwest was the reason why Milwaukee and St. Louis are now two of the nation's greatest beer brewing centers. Another European nation that joined the gourmet-tongues of America is Italy. The

Italians, who arrived in the late 19th century, gave America one of its most important touches in taste. They imported their use of the tomato, of which we think that it is the most Italian vegetable at all, used to spice up all of that pasta, pizza, and salad.

The French should not be excluded here, either. When the US made their bargain with the largest real estate deal in history by buying the Louisiana territory (Louisiana Purchase), people of French origin were included in the American way of life. They have kept, however, their way of cooking. In southern Louisiana we can still find some examples like Creole and Cajun cuisine. Both have the use of rice and seafood in common, both are highly spiced and borrow concepts from each other. The difference is that the roots of Creole cooking have grown from the region's earliest colonial history when the French first settled the area and fought with Spain for control long before the Louisiana Purchase. Their way of cooking is a mixture of French cuisine strongly affected by Spanish, African and Caribbean food, whereas Cajun food is more of a country way of cooking. After the French inhabitants of Nova Scotia were driven out of their settlements by the British in 1755 they went south and finally found their place in the swamps of Louisiana. They learned to keep their traditional cuisine and added available ingredients such as game, shrimp, and crawfish. They only use few herbs but serve the food, which is mostly cooked in one pot, with a relatively hot sauce.

Another really exciting branch of American cuisine is the Asian influence on its taste. The late 19th century brought many Asians to America. Of course, they had come before too, for instance on Spanish galleons; but political reasons like the lost First Opium War, several floods and crop failures, as well as for other reasons, brought many Asians to America. Especially due to its geographical location, California was one of the center-points of Asian immigration. The result was that these new Asian-Americans not only brought their native food but also mixed it with Mexican cuisine, resulting in dishes such as chili. Another well-known fact is that they also created new dishes. For instance: Did you know that a dish which is thought of as genuinely Chinese, Chop Suey, was actually created in San Francisco, where a guest wanted to eat something at a late hour and received a stew out of kitchen scraps?

Hamburgers, pizzas, French fries and all kinds of other dishes are connected with a cuisine that is thought of around the world as THE American food – fast-food. Although fast-food is not actually an American invention - already the ancient Romans had something like fast-food and medieval German construction workers invented the “Würstlbude”¹³ - it was the Americans who made it an economic success. And only through all those well-known fast-food chains did American cuisine in its fastest form become famous all over. Most of these

¹³ stand or shop, where hot sausages in buns are sold, today also known as hot dog

restaurants use all of the different styles of cooking, from Mexican food to classical hamburger sandwiches, from seafood to fried chicken, or pizza and pasta in all its variety. But America's food is not only fast-food. Like a dry sponge, America's culture has sucked up all cuisines, spices, and tastes and created its own blend. Since the Seventies this trend has been known as fusion food. A commune cookbook from 1972 under the title "Country commune cooking" suggests Ukrainian, Mexican, Asian Indian, even Tibetan recipes and cooking traditions mixed in its own recipes. It also names Bologna knish enchiladas, sweet and sour spaghetti sauce, Armenian polenta, Mexican-Italian blintzes, and Irish-Jewish stew.

In the second half of the 20th century Americans more and more came to the conclusion that the famous "melting pot" metaphor could not be applied to the US and its cultural diversity any longer. Since then the "melting pot" has been replaced by terms that better suit the actual condition of the country: metaphors of salad bowls or pizzas that express once more the cultural diversity of the US. The change is fundamental and is also reflected in the way Americans began to find their love for ethnic foods, which are of course "Americanized" in ways as described above. So one could finally state that the Americans have created a national cuisine of their own which reflects the diversity of this huge country.

V.2 The future of American food: a perspective

The food traditions of America continue to evolve. Consider the original Jewish bagel. Donna R. Gabaccia, author of "We are what we eat: ethnic food and the making of Americans," writes that the bagel is an example of the American penchant for experimenting with foods. "If we do not understand how a bagel could sometimes be Jewish, sometimes be 'New York,' and sometimes be American," she writes, "it is in part because we have too hastily assumed that our tendency to cross cultural boundaries in order to eat ethnic foods is a recent development. In fact, eating habits changed and evolved long before the rise of a modern consumer market for food."¹⁴

In the future, American food will continue to shift and change. America has such a rich heritage that there is no reason to underestimate the quality of its food and its resources to develop new dishes. But it may be the case that Americans will start to ignore the homegrown dishes in their own back yards. One could argue that the regional American food, a kind of cooking that once could almost be placed as specifically as a zip code, is in danger of fading away. An example of this argument is Key lime pie. Once made only in the region that produced the sour fruit, it now can be squeezed out of a boxed pudding mix. Crab cakes, the pride of the

¹⁴ Gabaccia, Donna R.: *We are what we eat: ethnic food and the making of Americans*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1998.

mid-Atlantic, can be defrosted and fried for any Arizona cowboy. America's quest for the quick food may have shortchanged its cooking.

On one hand, the future for traditional dishes "looks pretty positive" says food historian William Woys Weaver, author of "Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking." In his area, "home cooks still make them on weekends, churches offer them at fundraisers, local farmers still are growing the raw ingredients and chefs are playing with the old recipes to produce lighter and more upscale adaptations," he says. And yet such dishes may be in danger of being lost because of Americans' fervor over foods that are new and unusual, their obsession with the mass-produced fare, and changing attitudes toward dieting, plus a dwindling number of people who take enough time to cook the classics.

VI "Food - Next Right" - Food mass culture in America

Following many highways, it was almost never possible to miss an opportunity to fill one's empty stomach. At every exit and at every station a large sign shouting "Food - Next Right" had been posted along with a number of well known fast-food brands to make us feel comfortable and secure in terms of stilling our personal hunger without any hassle nor inconvenience.



Along any major highway, you can't miss this very promising sign.

As Europeans who had been in America before, only the context of our visit in the United States opened our eyes to this common pattern and broad scheme of advertising. It occurred to us that America was the perfect picture of the final haven of food at every corner. An old dream of humanity had come true, or at least it seemed so. No one actually needed to suffer any hunger, not even the inconvenience of travel was an obstacle anymore. "Food - Next Right" was right there!

However, just as with the pictures of great impressionists that become indistinct and separated into patches of color, the picture of the USA as a food haven somewhat blurred as well, if viewed closely. The availability of food now and then entered a state of over-availability, and the media played with the exchange of food and dietary advertisements. Often we saw advertising in favor of unlimited eating followed by their counterparts offering numerous dietary plans, so that it almost gave us the impression that the food industry and dietary industry were joining together in a rather unholy alliance.

Yet we have tried to free ourselves from European prejudices as well as from a blanket excitement about American food in order to have a closer look at what appears to be a “mass culture” of food. Countless convenient fast-food chains along highways belong there as well as the “Upper- Middle-Class-fusion-cuisine” of German-, Asian-, French-, and other “hyphenated”¹⁵ Americans. The advantages and disadvantages of the American food culture, as they appeared to us, however limited our experience is,¹⁶ shall be described here.

VI.1 Obesity

One of the most current problems of the United States that appeals to both Americans and Europeans is the problem of obesity. This problem stirs up prejudices in Europe, where people only have the chance to experience American cuisine and daily life through fast-food chains and TV. In America, however, we think we have seen the problem with our own eyes. It seems food can be purchased, consumed, advertised, and played with everywhere. Food seems to be available at every street corner.

Reading the latest issues about obesity and having seen some cases of it in public it seems to be not uncommon that two thirds of the American population do have a problem with their weight and, moreover, one-third of the population does have a serious disease – obesity. Although many Americans seem to follow some dietary plan, and although they have seriously lower fat consumption, the number of overweight people increases steadily.

During the practical part of our project we found several reasons that could serve as an explanation for these problems. Although this is a general statement, which we are only able to underscore with our experience, Americans consume a vast amount of carbohydrates.¹⁷ Instead of reducing the amount of energy consumption via a rigid fat-free diet, the effect is reversed by these carbohydrates. Furthermore, we have noticed the general problem of obesity connected with poverty. Low quality food¹⁸ seems to be especially accessible to low income-households, resulting in illnesses, allergies, and other food related troubles.

Another approach to the problems of obesity might be the diverse cultures in rural areas and in cities. Whenever we look at the different histories of food, we discovered that high-energy foods, such as fats, high cholesterol, highly sugared foods, have a very good reputation

¹⁵ Although Woodrow Wilson coined the term in order to use it with a rather negative connotation, it is used here in order not to forget any of the numerous nations that have emigrated to the USA.

¹⁶ Unfortunately our own overall experience during our stay in the United States is very limited, the results of our field research with questionnaires and interviews is limited as well due to the limited number of participants. Yet we can still recognize figures that cover our own experiences as well.

¹⁷ cf. chapter **IV.1.1** (Midwest).

¹⁸ Low quality food is defined by the poor quality of nutrition: high level of fat and carbohydrates, few or no vitamins and low fiber, but rich with cholesterol, hormones, and/or artificial ingredients.

in the working classes due to the fact that food had not always been available in reasonable and sufficient amounts. Today, the picture has somewhat changed: it is not “bread and games” anymore that the masses shout for, because the masses are fed. However, in rural and small town populations the food clichés¹⁹ still survive. Although the majority of these populations no longer need to labor in physically highly demanding jobs, except for e.g. farmers, the food eaten has not changed. People still seem to value Granny’s roasted turkey more than the city slicker salad with diet dressing.

The picture is different in cities and recreational areas, where a trained body has become a status symbol. At East Coast beaches one can see as many “Bay Watch” girls and boys, as on TV. Also, the young urban professional wants to look rather slim and fast, which is supposed to be modern. Having spoken about the quality of food and its price, it seems just natural that only the well-to-do single can afford an appropriate food that allows him or her to avoid weight problems.

When we spoke of all the “Food - Next Right” signs along major highways, the media and advertising already have been mentioned. It could well be that our observations are also influenced by the very pervasive media in the United States and its power to create certain images. This is the reason why we cannot leave out the role of advertising and media in our description.

VI.2 The role of advertising²⁰

Since the Chicago World’s Fair, and maybe even earlier, the United States has traditionally been seen as a country of consumption and mass consumption, along with a powerful advertising machine. So strong is advertising that it has become one of the important cultural links; not

¹⁹ Although the mentioned facts seem to be rather generalizing, they do draw an appropriate picture as we have experienced.

²⁰ “my country, ‘tis of
you, land of the Cluett
Shirt Boston Garter and Spearmint
Girl With The Wrigley Eyes (of you
land of the Arrow Ide
and Earl &
Wilson
Collars) of you i
sing: land of Abraham Lincoln and Lydia E. Pinkham,
land above all of Just Add Hot Water and Serve –
from every B.V.D.
let freedom ring
amen.”
E. E. Cummings, *POEM, OR BEAUTY HURTS MR. VINAL*

everybody knows about Wordsworth but most know about “A few words from our sponsor.”²¹ Advertising is everywhere: “Barely a space in our culture is not carrying commercial messages. Look anywhere. Schools? Channel One. Movies? Product placement. Ads invade our urinals, telephones (while we are on hold), taxis (alphanumeric displays), fax machines, catalogs, the wall facing the Stair Master at the gym, T-shirts, doctor’s offices, grocery carts, parking meters, golf tees, inner-city basketball backboards, elevators (piped in with the Muzak) ... ad nauseum (yes, even airline barf bags).”²² Although we experience strong advertising in Germany as well, the sheer power of American “Adcult”²³ struck us. However, thinking calmly about it, consuming and merchandising go together “like horse and carriage” as Sinatra would say. Advertising people have noticed food as being so important that even Esau had sold his birthright for a meal of pottage.

In our experience, “Manna for the Masses” seems to serve as a basic message to satisfy the people’s hunger, all the more, so when we think about the ever-successful stories of McDonald’s, Dunking Donuts, or Pizza Hut. It is not the food they serve anymore that draws in their patrons, it is the message, the cult, or even the culture behind it. Advertising promotes the message that biting into their burger, their pizza, their French fries, the taste, the wholesome experience, the refreshing memory is only theirs and that it is unique and not interchangeable. “Selling ‘em by the Sack” - White Castle even promotes the quantity of their burgers.

The other side is, of course, that unlimited food resources have consequences as described in the preceding chapter on obesity. Nevertheless, it is the media that keep their eyes directed towards that side of the story as well: It stunned us to see an “All-U-Can-Eat” commercial on TV followed right after an ad for some dietary plan with the same message: “Eat all you can! We will take care of you later.”

Another example of how food ads contribute to culture is the story of the Coca Cola Santa. What started as the foundation of Christian celebrations has become a potent platform for any kind of commercializing. Whenever we see a Santa in a Supermarket or Shopping Mall uttering his notorious “HO, HO, HO!” we see fusion culture of different European cultures and the marketing strategies of Coca Cola. Even the Jewish, who do not celebrate Christmas but Hanukkah, have Santa. “He has become so powerful that when the kids are told he doesn’t exist, their parents become depressed.”²⁴ The first time, Santa appeared in newspapers, as toy dolls, in magazines, children’s books, and on Christmas Cards. He even appears colored in red.

²¹ Twitchell: p. 4.

²² Twitchell: p. 2.

²³ Term coined by Twitchell.

²⁴ Twitchell: p.174 f.

However, this was not yet our Santa. “The jolly old St. Nick that we know from countless images did not come from Macy’s department store, neither did he originate in the imaginations of Moore and Nast²⁵, nor did he come from Western European folklore. He came from the early advertisements of the Coca-Cola Company.”²⁶ As we all know, there should be no problem selling soda beverages in summer, when the thirsty public is yearning for relief for their dry mouths. However, in winter Coca-Cola bottles had a problem being sold at a sufficient profit. This is when Santa enters the scene, enjoying a Coke after the hard work of delivering presents. From there it was not a long way towards our contemporary Santa Claus. Soon Coca-Cola Santa replaced all other Santas with his nice and jolly image. Other companies such as Toy-R-Us followed suit and presented their merchandising version of Santa.²⁷ These days it might be possible for the Jewish community to avoid Christ - they celebrate Hanukkah. Yet Coke’s Santa is omnipresent.

VII The European Perspective – Fact or Fiction?

America has always been looked on by Europeans as a place with no “real” culture, accused of as a domain for people without any heritage, but copying and selling out European culture instead. This may partly have its roots in the deep-seated fear of Europeans to be Americanized and thus being equalized and therefore becoming void of their own heritage. These fears of Americanization, however, have been blindfolded the old continent since England lost its colonies in America, or maybe even earlier. It has caused a lot of clichés to develop, and some of the clichés are going to be named here and will be looked closely upon. Some of the clichés have already been mentioned in the above chapters, as one can read about obesity, about fast-food, or beer in cans.

The statement of America as a cultureless place is interesting insofar as by denying America its culture, it is easy to deny its great cuisine as well. What is culture? Culture seems to be a vast term to define. In our limited view, it can be defined as something that happens when people do something besides their basic need to survive. This means that at any time when people are meeting to have a barbecue or to visit a restaurant, they demonstrate that they share values, that they know about common symbols, which are culturally connotated, such as table manners and the way food is presented. All this displays culture – thus Americans “have”

²⁵ Moore wrote a poem for his daughters (“A visit from St. Nicholas”), in which he had featured a small elf delivering presents through a chimney. Nast, an editorial cartoonist, later created drawings of him as some sort of Santa for Harper’s Weekly, where they were collected from and had been published in a book called “Santa Claus and his Works”.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

culture, which could even be defined as high culture, or how else would one define the highly developed cuisine in New York and other large cities? Even when we speak about the role of advertising, we describe highly developed parts of American culture, whose function of linking people can hardly be denied.

We have mentioned other clichés as well. One of them is the cliché about obese America, which should be seen as only partly true as described above. America is much too diverse as to utter such general statements about this problem. As an example, different nutritional habits of rural and small town areas have been mentioned compared to large city centers. Another fact is that in Europe the problem of obesity exists as well, and it exists for the same reasons.

Talking to fellow students, to parents, and looking at the answers of the questionnaires,²⁸ fears of Americanization are also rooted in the entering of American fast food chains in the European market. General statements about unhealthy food, and about distasteful hamburgers seem to repeat themselves fairly easy in all of the answers to our questions. It is true that American firms such as McDonald's or Burger King have established themselves with fast and powerful marketing strategies. But several arguments still speak against an Americanization of European society just because of convenient fast-food stores. One of them is that fast-food has always existed in Europe as well, it only became richer through an American nuance. By the way, no one is complaining about the countless kebab stores in our German cities, or about pizza deliveries, the latter an archetypical American invention. The other is that American firms had to Europeanize themselves in order to achieve their success on the market. Where in America can you buy beer at Burger King? The latest example of an American enterprise in Europe is the introduction of Starbucks, an American coffee shop chain that had to introduce porcelain mugs in order to attract patrons.

It is always fairly simple to judge a different culture just by looking at the surface. It is also true that fiction always has its hard core of truth and facts. However, when we look closer, a society opens itself up and displays its differences to our own society.

VIII Conclusion

America is the land of choice, including food, which simply means that you can get everything from fast-food to high class restaurant cooking, no matter how exotic or rare the food may be. In some ways it is remarkable that Americans have had time to develop regional culinary identities at all. When you think of the regional dishes of France and Italy, one notices that they were

²⁸ cf. questionnaire (German Questionnaire, IIA-IIC, p. 16f.)

strictly codified, or at least limited by what could be harvested or hunted within a few miles. Americans, on the other hand, have a short history combined with a long habit of moving around.

Just when certain dishes fix themselves in our imagination - sweet and smoky baked beans from Boston, fried catfish along the Mississippi, or chicken-fried steak in Texas and Oklahoma - along come conveniences such as refrigerators, factory canning and super highways for transport. They allow a whole lot of people to eat the same thing - Georgia peaches in Minnesota and Washington oysters in Illinois - at a pretty reasonable price.

In the end, two concepts are essential to understand American food. These two concepts are regionalism and diversity, whereas the accent lies on the latter. After all, American food differs from state to state, from region to region, and sometimes even from city to city as well. The US is a nation of newcomers, and its food reflects its origins.

IX Bibliography

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