

We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans

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Abstract:

A review of Donna R. Gabaccia's *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*.

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Article:

For anyone teaching a course on the anthropology of food and culture, or the history of food in American culture, Gabaccia's book, *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, is a must read. Her book puts into historical context the ethnic, regional, and national relationships of agriculture as well as food practices and preferences. Specifically, Gabaccia draws from the history of the Colonial Creoles, Native Americans, and waves of ethnic groups arriving to the United States over the past 200 plus years. This historical perspective provides the background of the varying horticultural and agricultural practices of different ethnic groups prior to their migration to the New World. It also looks at Native American traditions prior to, and after, contact with others arriving to the New World. She writes, "[b]y offering a culturally sensitive yet essentially materialist and economic view of American eating, *We Are What We Eat* reminds readers at every turn, of the mundane and everyday quality of much related to eating. To eat what we are, we must be able to produce the foods we want or we must create markets where we can buy them. To discuss American identity, at least expressed through our eating habits, involves excursion into the histories of agriculture, business, and consumption" (p. 235).

As Gabaccia points out, food is very much a cultural symbol, one that represents a cultural identity. Through the use of certain foods, be they herbs or spices, vegetables or fruits, or the manner in which foods are prepared, cultural and ethnic traditions are passed down through the sharing of food. Traditional, ceremonial and feasting foods, as well as the use ordinary or common foods, reinforces cultural and ethnic identity. Central to Gabaccia's historical understanding of ethnic food origins and food traditions is how such foods or similar foods are used in the U.S.. When foods could not be readily produced, such as in urban settings, ethnic stores and shops in these settings satisfied those culinary needs. What emerges from this historical perspective is the regional variation throughout the U.S. that mirrors the migratory patterns of where immigrant communities were established. For example, Gabaccia traces New England cuisine and how it differs from the culinary practices and food resources of the southwest, southeast, and midwest.

However, over time, and with increased contact with other ethnic communities and technological modifications, foods have been shared and borrowed from one region to another. From cold storage, more rapid transportation and increased movement of peoples there has been a cultural blending of foods and popularization of ethnic foods. Foods such as bagels, tortillas, hot tamales, canned beans, crackers/biscuits, soups, and stews have transformed consumption patterns and "American" eating habits.

Publication of cookbooks also contributed to the preservation of recipes and food uses, much of which could be transferred from one generation to another, or to others interested in cooking. According to Gabaccia, since World War II there has been confusion over what constituted regional American foods, as opposed to ethnic, corporate, or invented foods in the U.S.

Lastly, as the boundaries and barriers between ethnic groups weakened, food borrowing has become more of the norm. The popularizing of ethnic foods began with selling those foods outside of the home to local cafes, cafeterias, and restaurants. Over time, food chains have emerged, such as Taco Bell and Kentucky Fried Chicken, that have both standardized and normalized regional ethnic foods into the everyday fare found almost anywhere across the United States.