

# The State of American Cuisine

A white paper issued by the James Beard Foundation  
based on surveys conducted as part of the  
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Taste America® national food festival.

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*“American cuisine reflects the multicultural background of Americans. We are a country of people from many countries, living together in one melting pot. American cuisine, similarly, is the fusion of cuisines from many places.”*

—JBF TASTE AMERICA  
SURVEY RESPONDENT

## Introduction

The question of whether or not America can lay claim to a bona fide cuisine has been asked since the founding of our nation. Even though the first cookbook published on our shores after the American Revolution—*American Cookery* written by Amelia Simmons in 1796—is full of recipes that seem French or British, historians generally consider it a publisher’s attempt to use food as a means to fuse a national identity. Almost two centuries later, when James Beard wrote his own *American Cookery* in 1972, the jury was still out on whether American cookery equated to American cuisine. Today, food scholars, such as anthropologist Sidney Mintz and sociologist Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, continue to debate the question of whether America has a coherent national identity as it relates to food.

Though he is often referred to as “the father of American cuisine,” James Beard himself wondered about our preoccupation with identifying an American cuisine during an interview in the early 1980s with food authority Jim Fobel.<sup>1</sup> “Do you think we will eventually develop a cuisine?” Fobel asked Beard. “Well, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Beard replied. “I think we can stay as we are. I think we have good food and we don’t have to label it. We have one important thing that grew up in this country and that is the definition of regional cooking...we have a breadth of view and understanding.”

As part of the James Beard Foundation’s Taste America®, a national food festival orchestrated in 2007 as a celebration of the James Beard Foundation’s 20th anniversary, we decided to take the question of American cuisine to the streets. We wanted to know what and how the growing ranks of food lovers who subscribe to food magazines, watch 24-hour food television, buy cookbooks for their kitchens and their coffee tables, frequent trendy restaurants and favorite dives, and enjoy cooking for family and friends feel about the idea of an American cuisine. To broaden our pool of opinions, we threw a few food experts into the mix. Does America have a cuisine? we asked. If so, what is it? The answers we received are the data that form the basis of this white paper on the state of American cuisine.

## What is Cuisine?

*“The destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they are fed.”*

—JEAN-ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN (1825)

Before discussing whether there is such a thing as American cuisine, it is important to understand what cuisine is in the first place. Because how we cook and what we eat are so intrinsically linked to who we are as individuals and as a nation, and because food culture comprises a variety of tangible and intangible elements, cuisine is difficult to define. Cuisine is a form of cultural expression in the same way that sculpture and dance are. Echoing another aphorism by Brillat-Savarin, James Beard wrote in 1982 that “the truth of the matter is that the way people eat is an unconscious reflection of the way people live.”<sup>2</sup> Through cuisine, we can feel that we belong to a greater community. (We can also feel rejected by it.) Cuisine is clearly identifiable with a place of origin—if only because of how it is characterized: French cuisine is rooted in France, just as Cajun cuisine is rooted in southwestern Louisiana. The geographical nuance served up by the label of origin

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<sup>1</sup>This interview was published in *The James Beard Celebration Cookbook: Memories and Recipes from his Friends*, edited by Barbara Kafka (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>From “‘American’ Cooking,” published in *The Armchair James Beard*, edited by John Ferrone (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 1999), 311.

“American cuisine is not one cuisine, not yet, but numerous regional and ethnic cuisines reflecting immigration patterns. What is sometimes called (New) American Cooking is still evolving. But there is a very (North) American style of eating—fast food—instantly recognized the World over. Is it “cuisine?” U b the judges!”

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

attached to the word cuisine makes it more understandable and more meaningful as a marker of identity.

Cuisine relates inherently to the idea of nation. Even if we are not exactly sure how to accurately describe what we mean by the words French, Cajun, or American, we generally accept these designations, at least as they relate to and distinguish us. We understand that we are American because we share a land, an economy, and a political system that are easy to identify, if not to pinpoint. But we also share something much more fluid: national character—the unique, if sometimes indefinable attributes that make us culturally American. The foods we eat and how we cook them contribute to this more intangible idea of nation, especially in a country such as the United States, where general agreement about what defines our national cuisine is hard to come by.

Cuisine, as a cultural product, functions in both theory and practice and performs in both public and private spaces.<sup>3</sup> When cuisine is written down and codified, as was done in France in the early 19th and 20th centuries by great, literate French chefs such as Marie-Antoine Carême and Auguste Escoffier, it becomes easier to understand and to transmit to others. Recipes become part of the language of a country and of its cooks; methods and techniques become typical of that cuisine. Through this dissemination, cuisine also becomes more public, because it is no longer strictly something reserved for the home or something intimate between the cook and the diner. Whether it becomes public in restaurants or in the media, by the sheer fact that we *talk* about cuisine, that we create a discourse about food, we make it a public element of our culture.

This public, collective, discursive aspect of cuisine is what takes it beyond food, nutrients, and the individual and into the realm of national identity.<sup>4</sup> It includes both production and consumption at the very material level of food cooked and consumed, but also self-constitution at the cultural level because we identify with those foods that become part of us, whether we cook or eat them. In the United States, this public aspect of cuisine is complicated by the fact that so much of our culinary identity is defined in the home, not in restaurants.<sup>5</sup> We do not want to think of our food as codified and static, but rather prefer to see it as rich, diverse, and in constant motion. Everyone wants to try the latest thing. Food fads, whether they are ethnic, ingredient, convenience, or simply marketing driven, are a large part of the American diet. This openness to change suggests that we might prefer not having a clearly identifiable American cuisine in order to have a cuisine we associate with our openness and enthusiasm for new things.<sup>6</sup> “[American cuisine] is food that comes from the grassroots up, rather than handed down from the experts,” said *Road Food* aficionado Michael Stern during a live panel on American cuisine that was part of the 2007 Taste America and Charlotte Shout! festivals in North Carolina. “To define cuisine, it is a fundamental element: who are the people who create it? It seems that in a lot of places it is the great chefs, but I think that

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<sup>3</sup>Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson defines cuisine as the “properly cultural construct that systematizes culinary practices and transmutes the spontaneous culinary gesture into a stable cultural code. Cuisine, like dining, in turn turns the private into the public, the singular into the collective, the material into the cultural. It supplies the cultural code that enables societies to think with and about the food they consume.” *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the role of cultural discourse in nation formation, see Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Even though Americans consume an increasing number of meals outside the home, a concomitant rise in takeaway foods indicates that we still have a strong desire to eat at home.

<sup>6</sup>To this point, Sidney Mintz writes, “What makes a cuisine is not a set of recipes aggregated in a book, or a series of particular foods associated with a particular setting, but something more. I think a cuisine requires a population that eats that cuisine with sufficient frequency to consider themselves experts on it. They all believe, and care that they believe, that they know what it consists of, how it is made, and how it should taste.” *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 97.

*“I would define American Cuisine as something that first made its appearance in the U.S. and is an original cuisine, not a play on something from another country.”*

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

in this country, it’s the cooks. Not that we don’t have great chefs here, but to me they are doing something that is at best peripheral to American cuisine. American cuisine to me is made by cooks rather than chefs.”

Too often diners and media perceive adaptations made to dishes of a particular cuisine as an attack on its “authenticity.” Slippery definitions of authenticity aside, these attacks are evidence that cuisine also has a lot to do with memory, both individual and collective.<sup>7</sup> Cuisine, as a concept, has to be fluid enough to correspond to the different memories people have of it and meanings that people ascribe to it, whether those people do so individually or collectively. It is obvious from the answers of the James Beard Foundation’s Taste America® survey that Americans celebrate an incredible diversity, and that they do not see this diversity as an obstacle to the construction of a national cuisine. Rather, they celebrate it. American cuisine embraces multiple heritages and adaptability. Portland-based chef Vitaly Paley, who participated in the kick-off Taste America event, explained the Taste America project as celebrating American cuisine and the “incredible sense of community, and the community celebrating the same thing.” Through food, we can belong to a larger community, and together we can share the pleasures it provides.

For the notion of cuisine we are indebted to the French. The methods, code, literature, and general attitude toward food that emerged in France in the 18th century are still the model for our understanding of cuisine today. French cuisine was exportable in part because it was not tied to ingredients, but rooted in techniques that could be applied to whatever French chefs had at hand wherever they might be cooking. France’s cultural hegemony during the 19th century also added to its influence and breadth of dissemination. American cuisine, if it exists, is certainly a cuisine of a different stripe. No such codification exists. American cookbooks have largely targeted home cooks, and, as Beard noted in his interview with Jim Fobel, regionalism predominates in Americans’ understanding of their culinary selves. Instead of recipes, which are the sum of ingredients and techniques, cuisine in America is often grounded in an attitude or approach to food. In 1983, Beard identified what he called “an American attitude toward food,” which he characterized as an openness to experiment, a willingness to mix things up, an insatiable appetite, an appreciation of the regional dishes of which we are so proud.<sup>8</sup>

Today, the importance of locality is greater than ever in the minds of American consumers and producers. Dishes produced with local ingredients that speak about their place within the nation are elevated to *haute cuisine* status. Few restaurants open without touting their connections to local farmers or markets. The chefs who participated in Taste America emphasized their use of local, or at least American, ingredients in the dishes they cooked and served. Producers and consumers are speaking a common, public language. This public cuisine that centers around local ingredients offers the critical possibility of variations around dishes—the freedom that is so essentially American—while still evoking a feeling of unity. Has America found its cuisine?

## Methodology

In order to capture as many opinions about American cuisine as possible from as broad a national spectrum as we could hope to reach, the James Beard Foundation gathered data for this survey via a number of different channels.

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<sup>7</sup>On the importance of memory in the sense of taste and identity see Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>From “An American Attitude Toward Food,” published in *The Armchair James Beard*, edited by John Ferrone (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 1999), 317–325.

*“When I bite into a juicy cob of sweet corn grown on my parents’ farm in West Central, Minnesota, I taste America. The corn is home-grown and home-cooked by a farmer who provides food to our country.”*

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

Individuals visiting our website, [www.jamesbeard.org](http://www.jamesbeard.org), and the website dedicated to the James Beard Foundation’s Taste America® events, [www.jbftasteamerica.com](http://www.jbftasteamerica.com), were encouraged to complete a brief survey that asked three simple questions:

## SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. *Do you believe there is an American cuisine?*
2. *If you believe there is an American cuisine, how would you define it?*
3. *If you do not believe there is an American cuisine, why not?*

Participants in the survey were also asked to name five dishes they believe could be considered quintessentially American (without prompting). People were driven to the survey by a national press release, which was picked up in several regional newspapers and on several food blogs, and by regular reminders in James Beard Foundation communications to both members and nonmembers. The survey was live on the Foundation’s website from September through November 2007. The questions were answered by a total of 131 respondents.

As part of its value-added sponsorship program for the James Beard Foundation’s Taste America®, *Every Day with Rachael Ray* magazine created a microsite that also asked visitors to contribute their thoughts on American cuisine. Those people who found their way to [www.rachaelraymagtasteamerica.com](http://www.rachaelraymagtasteamerica.com) were asked to tell us “What do you taste when you Taste America?” Responses came from around the country, from food lovers and food professionals alike. A total of 117 people wrote in their thoughts, making the number of survey respondents from both websites total 248.

To supplement the opinions of foodies across the nation, we also called on a number of experts in various fields related to food, nutrition, and gastronomy to participate in weekly radio panels on the topic of whether or not America has a cuisine. Coordinated and hosted by JBF Award-winning radio personality Jennifer English of the *Food & Wine Radio Network*, these radio panels began on Sunday, September 2, 2007, and were aired live for two hours every subsequent Sunday through September 30, 2007 on KVOI AM in the Phoenix, Arizona, area, as well as on the station’s website.

The conversation continued live on stage at the Charlotte Shout! festival in Charlotte, North Carolina, on September 29, 2007, where Ed Behr (publisher of *Art of Eating*), John Mariani (columnist for *Esquire* and *Wine Spectator*), Laura Shapiro (historian and author), and Michael Stern (columnist for *Gourmet*) participated in a panel discussion on American cuisine moderated by the James Beard Foundation’s Vice President, Mitchell Davis.

To compile the data collected from these various venues, answers to survey questions and various statements made during panel discussions were coded, tabulated, categorized, and analyzed using simple qualitative and quantitative methods. The results were used as the basis of the research in this paper.

## *So, Is There an American Cuisine?*

If one thing is clear from the results of the James Beard Foundation’s Taste America® survey, it is that American cuisine means a lot of things to a lot of people. The survey responses force us to reconsider what we might traditionally think of as cuisine, at least as it relates to America. Many definitions of national cuisines, such as what we understand to be French or Italian cuisine, make little or no room for regional variation. Even if in practice, the cuisines of France and Italy vary greatly from one place to the next, outside of their respective countries they are perceived to be a unified whole. In the United States, according to this survey at least, a national cuisine

*“American cuisine is the fast, easy, and common. The cereal, milk, and orange juice in the morning, the peanut butter and jelly for lunch, and the hot dogs, hamburgers, pizza, fried chicken and apple pie for dinner. These are American, and are associated with America.”*

—SURVEY RESPONDENT

exists in a regional form. The survey responders said what makes American cuisine a cuisine is precisely its disunity. American cuisine morphs, adapts, borrows, creates, and roots itself wherever people enjoy it.

### QUESTION 1

*Do you believe there is an American cuisine?*

Yes 90.8% No 9.2%

In Charlotte, the speakers on the American cuisine panel each had his or her own insightful answer to the questions of whether and what American cuisine is. For Laura Shapiro, who has extensively researched and written about the impact of the food industry on the way we cook and eat, the period of the 1950s and 1960s that gave birth to the string bean casserole is crucial to American cuisine: “It’s not our best cooking and it’s certainly not our only cooking, but it is the most American cooking that there is, and that’s the stuff that was invented after WWII,” she said. “I think that *the* American dish is string bean casserole that you make with frozen string beans, canned mushroom soup, and the French fried onion rings on top. It’s entirely artificial and we invented it.”

John Mariani agreed that the post-WWII moment in American food history was critical, but he traces the origins of American cuisine back further. For him, the difference between America and France, in the treatment of cuisine, is one of linguistic elitism: French people wear underwear just like we do, even if they call it lingerie; likewise, “We’ve always been cooking 365 days a year,” he said. “We’ve been cooking since the pilgrims got here and the settlers got to the South and the Spanish came through Mexico, so there’s a highly developed cookery that is still very regional. But there’s no question that as of the 1950s and 60s everybody could have strawberries any time of the year. There was a revolution—not necessarily a wonderful one, but a revolution.”

For Michael Stern and Ed Behr, there is no single American cuisine, but a plurality of cuisines, instead. Behr identified “energy, optimism, self-confidence, openness, and eagerness for cultural borrowing,” as the broad characteristics that could be associated with cuisine in the U.S., but he qualified that while this makes this country a leader in “global cuisine, it doesn’t give us an American cuisine.” Stern, meanwhile, compared American cuisine to folk art: “As in most folk art, originality is not that prized. What is important is carrying on a certain tradition, maybe making it your own a little bit, but fundamentally, American cuisine as folk art is what’s important to people because that’s part of their heritage.”

These statements made by our panel of experts echoed what survey respondents from around the country had to say about American cuisine.

To understand the thinking behind the survey respondents who believe there is an American cuisine, it is illuminating to look at the words they used to define it.

**TABLE 1: Word Games**

If you believe there is an American cuisine, how would you define it?

WORDS	USED IN % OF DEFINITIONS
“region” or “regional”	34.2%
“culture	16.2%
“comfort”	9.0%
“melting pot”	8.1%
“native”	8.1%

(source: The James Beard Foundation’s Taste America® Survey, 2007)

Out of the respondents who felt there was no American cuisine, only one said that no dishes came to mind as being quintessentially American. The others despite not believing in a national expression of cuisine, listed dishes such as hamburgers, apple pie, macaroni and cheese, barbecue, fried chicken, pot roast, brownies, pancakes, and ketchup as most American. Interestingly, these answers match those of the participants who thought that an American cuisine existed. The same words appeared in answers explaining the lack of a cuisine that appeared in those answers justifying it: diversity, regionalism, immigration, cultural influences, size of the country—all these concepts appeared as ways to explain, in the negative answers, why there could not be an American cuisine. For the believers, these same attributes became the unique and identifiable characteristics of our foodways. What this discrepancy suggests is that people agree on the characteristics of the food served in America, but disagree on definition of cuisine.

## *American Cuisine is...*

### 1. Just Like Us

The qualities that participants attributed to American cuisine related closely to qualities associated with America and Americans themselves: “American cuisine is straightforward and honest,” wrote one respondent. “Hearty, soul-fulfilling, familiar, comforting, progressive, quintessentially wholesome,” is how another described it. “American cuisine is still the simple meat and potatoes-type meal it was when we were a nation of farmers, ranchers, and explorers,” wrote yet another respondent. One of the people who completed the survey pointed to the variety of different heritages that make up our nation, noting “The synergistic fusion of the world’s cultures with our unique soils and species has produced a moving, multifaceted cuisine, constantly changing, constantly improving, superior to any other in the world.”

We eat who we are, or at least we eat who we think we are and who we want to be. These characteristics of Americanness, because they relate to positive values with which we want to associate ourselves, and our country, are a natural response to a question that asks for a definition of American cuisine. We could imagine that a similar survey conducted in France, Italy, China, or Mexico would produce results that describe the self-perception of the people in those places as well as they do their dishes.

## *American Cuisine is...*

### 2. Mom’s Cooking

Good or bad, the food we grew up on strongly influences what we think of as American cuisine. “American cuisine is the home-cooked, from-the-farm recipes created when the world was a smaller, simpler place and people ate what they raised,” one survey respondent answered wistfully. While rooting American cuisine in the home, another respondent added a layer of creativity to old standbys, revealing an acceptance of the mutability of even home cooking: “[American cuisine] is the comfort food I crave so much because that’s what I grew up eating,” this person wrote. “It’s the dishes my mom learned from her mom. Today we are doing great things with old American favorites—cheese grits with roasted peppers for one.” While a sense of heritage is evident in this answer, it shows that even the most intimate, familial cuisine is fluid.

For the most part, mom’s food or dishes based on homegrown ingredients and longstanding traditions get complicated quickly. For example, one nostalgic respondent described American cuisine as the food that “moms cooked in the 1950s and 1960s, food that the Cleaver family, Donna Reed, and *Father Knows Best* would eat.” Unwilling to accept foreign influences, this respondent continued, “All the food

since that time (pizza, tacos, chili, sushi) has been brought in from other cultures, therefore it is not truly American.”

Furthermore, American cuisine ought to be shielded from matters of nutrition, for “health concerns by the Baby Boomers created the trend toward less fried foods and high calorie foods, but this is not what Americans want to eat. We grew up with casseroles, Jell-O salads, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Miracle Whip, and Velveeta. THAT’s American cuisine, and I miss it.” The clichéd “melting pot” will not do, according to this protectionist respondent, because the blending distracts from the idea of American cuisine as one that is simple and from the home.

### *American Cuisine is...*

#### 3. Adapted from Different Cultures

The majority of survey respondents who mentioned this country’s cultural variety, however, support the idea that the blending of cultures is an important part of our culinary heritage. American cuisine is “North American Comfort Food. 95% of ‘Americans’ are immigrants. Each culture brought their cooking methods, food, and spices to America. They farmed the soil, hunted game, and incorporated their ways into the food of the land,” wrote one survey participant. Another said that “American cuisine is a regional, that is, region-by-region cuisine. So, it’s not one homogenous cuisine, but one defined by local product, the culture, ethnic group that first settled in the region and was probably influenced by the American native population as well...” A third wrote “America is a melting pot. It was formed by the hard-working people that emigrated here from lands as far east as China and Japan, as far north as Russia, and of course, Europe. They took staples of the land and prepared them in ways that satisfied their appetites. True American food is an amalgam of this passed down from generation to generation.”

Taking something from somewhere else and making it our own seems to be typical of American cuisine. Whether preparing ingredients native to this country, or to this continent, using techniques acquired from other cultures, or adopting dishes from other countries, such as Italian pizza, as our own, we create American cuisine in the way we cook and the way we eat every day.

### *American Cuisine is...*

#### 4. Very Regional

The idea of regionalism is essential to any discussion of American cuisine, as Beard himself understood and our survey respondents underscored. As stated above, 34.2% of our respondents used the words “region” or “regional” in their definition of American cuisine. In some answers, regional cuisine appeared to be completely independent from the nation as a whole, that is, cuisine was not necessarily grounded in any trans-national tradition. “American cuisine is based on a regional interpretation of local ingredients,” wrote one participant, describing a double layer of locality. A northeastern fruit cobbler made with a Georgia peach would be an example of mixed regionalization. Another respondent perceived American cuisine to be a local interpretation of something more national, like a highly ritualized and articulated holiday meal: “A cuisine which develops from national traditions (i.e. Thanksgiving) combined with local customs (i.e. cornbread stuffing).”

Conceptualizing regional cooking can be confusing—some dishes that are considered American by a majority might not fit neatly into one regional category or another. The complex response of one participant demonstrates the difficulty of such regional categorization: “Each region in the United States has its own take on what constitutes American cuisine. What we have is regional American cuisine. Steak & po-



tatoes (American), lobster & seafood (New England), fish, oysters etc. (Pacific Northwest), stone crabs & New World (Southeast), etc. But, when I think true American, I think Thanksgiving dinner.” One wonders where to situate “steak and potatoes” in a cuisine defined by regional cooking? And how to account for Thanksgiving?

Not all regions are represented equally among the responses. California is only mentioned once, in relation to *cioppino*, a seafood stew of Italian origin now often associated with San Francisco. California cuisine, while possessing many of the traits described as characteristic of American cuisine by respondents (fresh, local, adapted, blended, or creative, for example) did not appear in any of the answers. This is perhaps because it is a cuisine more associated with restaurant cooking than with home cooking, which seems to go against the results of the survey. While a couple of answers mentioned culinary personalities like James Beard, Alice Waters, Alfred Portale, or Tyler Florence as being influential in the idea of an American cuisine, for the most part American cuisine is being described by most survey respondents as a cuisine constructed in the home.

Among the most prominently featured regions, the South appears 15 times and New England 6 times. Some of the answers hint at the early settlement of those regions as a reason for the prominence of their native cuisines: “I think true American food originated in the South, brought about by the local foods that were available,” wrote one respondent.

## *Iconic American Dishes*

Which dishes did the survey’s participants identify as quintessentially American? While regional nuances qualified some of the answers (North Carolina-style barbecue, Cincinnati chili, southern fried chicken, New England clam chowder, or Chicago-style pizza), most answers did not include geographic markers. They appeared simply as apple pie, corn on the cob, hamburger, crab cakes, or lobster.

When looking at the complete series of answers written in by each respondent, including his or her definition of American cuisine, it becomes clear that these simple dishes carry a lot of meanings. Maryland might be implied in the crab cake answer. Maine is so tightly linked to lobster or the lobster roll that adding an origin to the dish would be superfluous. Many dishes, such as jambalaya, shrimp and grits, or pecan pie, have their roots in the American South. It is arguable that the participants wrote their answers for a knowledgeable audience, one that does not need specification. Of course, everyone would know that jambalaya is from Louisiana. We would not think of calling the dish Louisiana jambalaya. After all, French fries are not called *frites françaises* in Paris. Through our shared identity comes a shared understanding of these hidden meanings.

Similarly, the five dishes most often cited as quintessentially American did not include specific geographic characteristics. Rather, these dishes tended to embody comfort and home, or the low-key setting of a diner: “Diner food—cheeseburgers, shakes, apple pies. Comfort food—mac ’n’ cheese, meatloaf,” was an attempt of one respondent to define the most iconic American dishes. Sweets provide comfort, undoubtedly, which can explain the prevalence of apple pie in the answers, aside from its traditional association with the U.S. (Apple pie is, of course, a dish that originates in England.) On the panel in Charlotte, Laura Shapiro described our love affair with dessert as the “defining feature of American cooking.” She stated: “We are the ones who turned salad into a dessert. We invented ginger ale salad. We’ll do anything for dessert.”

**TABLE 2: Iconic American Foods**

List the five most iconic American foods

ICONIC FOODS	INCLUDED IN % OF RESPONSES
Hamburgers and Cheeseburgers	44.4%
BBQ	39.3%
Fried Chicken	31.6%
Mac'n'Cheese	29.1%
Apple Pie	26.5%

*Note:* Because respondents were asked to fill in five foods, the percentages add to more than 100%.

*(source: The James Beard Foundation's Taste America® Survey, 2007)*

Even as survey respondents touted the diverse influences of American food, from its native products to its immigrant imports, they chose as typically American dishes those which function as neutral canvas for whatever palette one chooses to personalize it.

### *Mac 'n' Cheese*

Mac'n'cheese is an American dish whether it is made from a box, as described by one respondent as the “bright orange kind,” or from scratch using local cheddar, cream, and the finest, organic pasta. A dish like this is open to interpretation, variation, personal or cultural influence, and tradition. The way our mothers made mac'n'cheese while we were growing up is likely to influence what we consider good mac'n'cheese as adults.

### *Fried Chicken and Apple Pie*

The same can be said of fried chicken. Do you soak the chicken pieces in buttermilk or brine them before frying? Do you coat them in breadcrumbs, cornflakes, or flour? How do you season the coating? Participants did not go into details, but we can assume that each had in mind a specific taste he or she associates with fried chicken. Similar questions could be asked of apple pie. Is the crust made with shortening? Does the filling include cinnamon? Is it a deep-dish pie? Our favorite foods come with a context, a story. Even when associating them with the entire country, as we asked respondents to do in this survey, these foods exist mainly in their relationship to our own experiences and preferences.

### *Hamburgers and Barbecue*

Hamburgers/cheeseburgers and barbecue are slightly different from the other top answers. While they also are widely open to personalization, they evoke different dining environments. Instead of the home kitchen or dining room table, burgers and barbecue move us to a different setting. Most likely, we eat these outdoors or in restaurants sitting around a wooden table at a famous barbecue or burger joint, or enjoying our neighbor's hospitality. These dishes convey an idea of entertaining and public eating that is not present in the other three dishes. The public performance that surrounds burgers and barbecue is probably as important as the food itself. Unlike the other dishes, hamburgers and barbecue are also associated with male cooks. Mom's influence on our food and food memories diminishes when thinking about

barbecue sauce or a grill master's special technique because these are the culinary domains of males. In selecting these two dishes as most iconic of American cuisine, participants in the survey express the tension between home and professional, male and female cooking that is apparent in most discussions of cuisine. The question arises, Is American food made by men or women?

## Conclusion

So, what is the state of American cuisine? Do we have one? Is there a national, unifying concept of cuisine around which we can all rally? After compiling these survey results, looking back at the panels we held in conjunction with the James Beard Foundation's Taste America®, and thinking about our daily conversations on the topic, as James Beard implied, it seems reductive to confine the richness and diversity of influences that are found in the foods we eat into one cuisine—unless, of course, we distance ourselves enough from the French idea of cuisine to create a language unique to the United States. In that language, home-cooked foods and restaurant dishes, if they share ingredients and heritage, all become part of a national idea of cuisine. Cowboy food and recent immigrant dishes can share space on the national plate. American cuisine is fusion, not confusion; complex, not complicated. It makes us who we are as much as we make it what it is. Acceptance of its differences and diversity is what makes it American.

We know that American cuisine, like all cuisines, is not static. Answers to a similar survey 10 years from now might prove different, according to some of the definitions offered here.

Perhaps James Beard said it best, “We have a great tradition of home cooking and restaurant cooking that spans three centuries. We are now, I hope, in a new epoch of gastronomic excellence that, with a liberal seasoning of common sense, will draw on the best of old American cookery as well as on the technological advances of the new.”<sup>9</sup> And what a delicious cuisine that is.

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<sup>9</sup>“American' Cooking,” 311.

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