

The Mainstreaming of Outsider Cuisines

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Introduction

I assumed this topic would cover cuisine options from foreign lands now widely available in America. I could report statistics such as how many Thai restaurants there are in Fort Wayne (there are about 13 that identify primarily as Thai) or explain why “Asian fusion” menus include anything from fried rice to sushi to Korean barbecue, to Vietnamese pho [fuh]. But it turns out, where American food came from, where it comes from now, or how it evolves, is much more interesting than that.

The “mainstreaming” of cuisine is a first world toy box in which third world street food is elevated to gourmet status. Happily, the box is ever-expanding to include more and more choices available to a wide consumer pool, now brimming with diversity and seeking dishes like mom, mama, abuela or 母亲 Mǔqīn [moo-CHEEN] used to make. The choices before us are truly endless and change rapidly, daring anyone with adventurous tastebuds to keep up with trends on menus and at the grocery store, and daring food processors and restaurateurs to create the next big thing.

The appetizer course of this paper considers the long arc of cuisine main streaming which has existed since people traveled over the next mountain and found other people using ingredients and recipes that tasted better, preserved food longer, fermented nicely, or more reliably sustained life.

This first course dips into America’s melting pot, brimming with corn, spices, meat and fish, with the influence of native and enslaved people and cultures from around the globe.

The main course will serve up reasons why cuisine mainstreaming is now operating at warp speed compared to that long arc of history. Technology in the kitchen and in our phones is a big part of that story, but so are celebrity chefs, society’s embracing of cultural diversity, sophisticated marketing, our desire for miracle health foods, and who is most influenced by any of the above.

Finally, save room for a dessert course highlighting ideas for a romantic Valentine’s Day dinner featuring savory gems of mainstreamed cuisine in Fort Wayne.

Appetizer Course – the Long Arc of Cuisine Mainstreaming

All of the food history of this hemisphere cannot be digested in one Quest paper, so let's start about 9,000 years ago.

"The Native peoples of the Americas were great food scientists. Over countless generations they learned to take the plants they saw growing around them, improve them, plant them, harvest them, and turn them into the foods we know today as corn and potatoes, cassava and peanuts, tomatoes and chile peppers, chocolate and vanilla." (1)

It was that 9,000 years ago mark when people in what is now Mexico invented corn. Yes, invented, because "corn does not exist in nature and was developed entirely by human beings." (2)

Ancient peoples in southwestern Mexico encountered a wild grass called teosinte that offered ears smaller than a pinky finger with just a handful of stony kernels. But by stroke of genius or necessity, these Indigenous cultivators saw potential in the grain, adding it to their diets and putting it on a path to become a domesticated crop that now feeds billions. (3)

A recent research study into the DNA of 2,000-year-old corn cobs revealed that the "mainstreaming of corn" into the cuisines of Central and South America took millennia. Humans first started selectively breeding corn's wild ancestor teosinte in Mexico, but partially domesticated varieties of the crop did not reach the rest of Central and South America for another 1,500 and 2,000 years. (4)

Domesticating corn was not the only cuisine breakthrough.

In order to turn dried corn kernels into a dough that can be shaped into flat cakes such as tacos or tortillas, they must be mixed with ashes or lime or limestone – substances that give off alkalis. This process is still known by the term the Aztecs used, "nixtamalization." Corn contains niacin, a form of vitamin B that all human beings need. But our bodies can only access and absorb that crucial vitamin if corn has been nixtamalized. ...Corn and knowledge of how to prepare it spread from Mexico as far north as Ottawa, as far east as Cape Cod, and as far west as Arizona. (5)

Nixtamalization did not always follow the new places where corn was grown. The San Antonio Colonial Tortilla Factory's website explains that nixtamalization today

is mainstreaming back into “global recognition”: “Many food companies now utilize automated machines to streamline the nixtamalization process, making the method more efficient without sacrificing traditional flavors. ... Culinary schools are increasingly incorporating traditional techniques like nixtamalization into their curriculum.” (6)

Because of growing awareness of the health benefits, nixtamalized corn products are now available in grocery stores. Check out the labels on products such as tortilla chips, and other corn-based snacks to see if they are nixtamalized. (7) (I checked at home – the chips we most recently purchased are not).

On the note of Mexican food mainstreaming, we look back to 1940, when Ignacio Anaya was working at the Victory Club restaurant in Piedras Negras, Mexico, just across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas. According to the locals, Ignacio had closed the kitchen one night when three women arrived and asked him to make them something to eat. (8)

“He cut up some tortillas into triangles, fried them, added cheese and pickled jalapeño peppers, and heated the dish in the oven.” (9)

Ignacio’s new culinary concoction really caught on. By 1950, it was the signature dish of the Victory Club, named after creator, who was known by the common nickname for Ignacio: Nacho. Nachos grew in popularity in the U.S., boosted in 1978 when Howard Cosell was served some while broadcasting a Monday night football game in Dallas and raved about them on-air. (10)

Cuisine in the Americas was also enriched by the food and culture of many African peoples. Spanish records from the 1500s list enslaved people from specific African locations, including West Africa, Morocco and Mozambique. DNA studies have shown that the first cattle brought to Mexican territories were from Africa, and “the earliest cattle ranchers were Africans, probably from West Africa, who were experienced herders.” (11)

Even earlier than the 1500s, Europeans who had learned about the spices and crops of Asia and the Americas introduced and traded them in Africa.

[African] Cooks were mixing traditional African spices and foods with Asian ingredients before any of them were enslaved or sent across the ocean. Creative and experimental cooks ...found tasty ways to turn American corn and casava, chile peppers and peanuts into West African favorites. “African” food was already “African American” long before 1619... When Africans arrived in the Americas, they brought

their knowledge of food, seasoning, and cooking techniques with them. (12)

If ever there was an American city with a history of mainstreaming cuisine it would be New Orleans.

New Orleans' food brings together native ingredients; Native American, African, and African American food knowledge; and European influences, including French, German, and French Canadian (Cajun). The dish that perfectly exemplifies this mixture – in more ways than one – is gumbo. (13)

Gumbo is a hearty stew that's served hot over rice. Gumbo can be made with numerous combinations of fresh or smoked sausage, meat, seafood, and/or vegetables. The name derives from a West African word for okra, suggesting that gumbo was originally made with okra as a thickening agent. The use of filé (dried and ground sassafras leaves) was a contribution of the Choctaws and possibly other local Native tribes. (14) Later gumbo recipes started to incorporate French and Creole influence by making a roux to thicken the dish. (15)

America's waterways were teeming with fish, valued by newly arrived Africans as familiar, healthy, and free. Into the 20th century, community fish fries featuring catfish, perch or trout, coated in cornmeal and fried to perfection in oil, and served with hot sauce on the side, became popular events. (16)

Fried chicken was also on the menu of African American celebrations and restaurants, but the roots of that dish are from a cooking method brought to the U.S. by Scottish immigrants. Flavorful fried chicken was a Sunday special meal for white people of the South too, but that likely had much to do with who was cooking it. By the mid-19th century, enslaved African Americans had fully embraced fried chicken as part of their culture, seasoned with those wonderful spice blends developed in Africa. Fried chicken also generated income for African American women who sold it to Civil War-era train passengers because it "traveled easily." (17)

In the 1950s, "Colonel" Harland Sanders adopted traditional techniques perfected by African Americans in the US South and began franchising his Antebellum-themed Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant after figuring out how to mass produce fried chicken by greatly shortening its cooking time. (18)

Let's shift back in time in this appetizer round to the English settlers who came to the area they called "New England." We think of folks like the pilgrims being thrilled with the bounty of food that included clams, lobster, scallops, pumpkins, squash, cranberries and corn. But what these settlers really wanted was white bread.

Wheat did not flourish in the soil and climate of New England, but corn did. The new arrivals referred to this as "Indian corn" because in English usage "corn" meant grain. This Native corn, although made into a variety of products such as corn bread, pancakes, corn pudding, etc., was considered inferior to wheat." (19)

Fast forward in this time of slow mainstreaming to the 1830's. "Food reformers" espoused the virtues of a healthy diet that was plain and provided sufficient fuel. They believed everyone could and should make the choice to eat what they considered good food instead of bad food – as if everyone had the luxury of choice. "Poverty, illness, disease (they claimed) were products of weakness, self-indulgence, and the wrong foods." (20) They pointed to the disease pellagra that was common in Southern Italy, and began afflicting children in the American South.

According to the food reformers, the Italians were sickened not by the fact that they were poor and so ate 'badly' but by their too spicy, too oily, too complicated, too often vegetable-based foods compared to hearty, protein-rich beef. ...Garlic, critics claimed, was turning Italian peasants into alcoholics. Poor whites and African Americans in the South ate corn and pork, not 'healthy' wheat and beef. (21)

These "nutritionists," for all their supposed knowledge, did not know about the value of nixtamalization. Neither many Americans. "The corn in the American South was not nixtamalized, so it did not provide the niacin people needed. Bad food was not making people poor. Poverty was forcing people to eat whatever could fill their stomachs." (22)

Wonderful cuisine did overcome elite society's lauding of bland food as healthy. We can thank Mamma Bertolotti for that. In the early 1900's, she and her husband Angelo owned Bertolotti's Restaurant in New York City's Greenwich Village. She served a hearty minestrone soup along with Italian bread and red wine, another sign of moral failure according to the reformers. (23)

This paper does not need to explain to this refined “foodie-filled” audience what happened over the next decades, to today. Italian red sauce, pasta and pizza remain American and worldwide staples. Thank you, Mamma Bertolotti and all those who rebelled against bland!

Main Course – Mainstreaming at Warp Speed

On that happy note, let’s move to the main course: Mainstreaming at Warp Speed. How did this long arc of mainstreaming at a snail’s pace over millennia develop into food truck escargot? That’s a real thing, by the way. Escargot tacos, sliders and kabobs, served with spicy sauces, are affordable street food, making those snails more accessible than ever. (24)

So, how did it happen that the world is now our oyster (and I’m not talking crackers floating in soup)? Just think back and you can start to understand what created warp speed mainstreaming.

Remember when the only place to see a menu was when you were physically in a restaurant (unless it was posted in the front window)? Remember when looked in a cookbook to find a recipe? Remember when the only celebrity chef you recognized was Julia Child? Remember when grocery store frozen food sections offered vegetables, TV dinners, pizza, fish sticks, ice cream, and not much else?

If those questions make you suspect that the high pace of cuisine change is partially due to technology, you are correct. But the reasons are much broader than that. Cultural and societal trends, immigration, science and generational differences all play a part in the feast we now have before us.

Food & Wine magazine considered this in an article published this past October entitled, “The Top 25 Food Culture Trends That Defined the Past 25 Years.”

Top of the list: “Everyone’s a critic.”

Yelp.com launched in 2004, and one year later, anyone was able to use it to publish a review about a restaurant they visited – for better and for worse. All of a sudden, restaurant criticism was not exclusive to the professionals. Anyone could be a critic, and those amateur reviews became how many of us determined where and what to eat. Restaurant reviewing turned into a hobby for some, and a blood sport for others: the internet became flooded with every type of niche food blog you could imagine. (25)

Smart phones help those food bloggers spread the image of the good, bad or disgusting about food. Remember when you used to take photos of people smiling around a dinner table? Now we take pictures of the food.

“Instagram launched in 2010, giving us a platform to post these food photos.” (26)

The smartphone app, TikTok, launched in 2017, becoming a forum for short-form cooking videos. Thanks to the “For You” page algorithm, pretty much anyone can go viral – and those viral videos can shape culinary trends for years to come. Think about the tomato feta pasta, a recipe video by @feelgoodfoodie that started with, “Because of this recipe, the grocery stores in Finland ran out of feta cheese.” Soon enough, American grocery stores ran out of feta cheese too – sales for blocked feta increased by 117%. (27)

The voices sharing food experiences and cuisine information have diversified in social media, but have remained largely white in the world of restaurant critics. Food & Wine notes that this is changing, and therefore broadening what we know and want to experience when it comes to cuisine.

One writer who called out the mainstream food media’s lack of diversity is Korsha Wilson, who in 2019 wrote an essay entitled “A Critic for All Seasons - What would restaurant criticism look like if it represented diners like me?” for the website Eater.com. (28)

Wilson wrote that she left “a four-hour meal at The Grill, one of New York City’s most opulent and critically acclaimed restaurants” feeling as unsatisfied as she was uncomfortable with The Grill’s “luxurious nostalgia - ...the fantasy of feeling like one of the wealthiest New Yorkers of the 1960s.” (29)

Wilson also dined at Henry restaurant near Madison Square Park. The chef is Joseph “JJ” Johnson, who created a menu that “is the culmination of years of travel and deep research on the African diaspora and its impact on the world’s cuisines. Here, Africa’s spices and cooking techniques are applied to ingredients from all over the world. ...Lamb kebabs are served with kimchi and roti bread on the side, while shrimp and pork dumplings are presented on a bed of fragrant yellow curry.” (30)

New York Times critic Pete Wells gave Henry’s *one* star, remarking in his review the clientele gave the Henry’s “more the appearance of a restaurant in Harlem than of one just off Herald Square.” (31)

Of the Times review, Wilson wrote, “by noting the race of the clientele it implies that a dining room composed largely of black diners is out of place in a midtown Manhattan neighborhood, even though some 24 percent of the city’s residents are black.” (32)

Today there is an “ongoing wave of Black-created mainstream media,” which Food & Wine considers a top 25 trend that celebrates “black and brown culinary creators.” (33)

A trend that has made old food new is local sourcing of what we eat. Fort Wayne has clearly followed this trend, with an increased number of farmers markets and more restaurants such as Tolon featuring locally grown and processed meats, cheeses and honey.

“Farm to fork” is a social movement based on valuing principles such as environmental sustainability, local economic support, and fresher, healthier eating. Consumers are not alone in driving the trend. The hospitality industry, including chains of hotels and restaurants, and developers and architects are collaborating in partnerships to empower culinary leaders to start reducing environmental impact, reducing carbon footprint and celebrate the richness of local culture and cuisine. (34)

Those who influence how cuisine expands include giant corporations and entire industries devoted to developing flavors and studying cultural and demographic differences that impact what we want and what we get.

When it comes to a flavor trend that just won’t quit, pumpkin spice comes to mind whether you like it or not. Of course, pumpkin recipes have used spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger for centuries. In the 1930s, spice manufacturing companies came out with a revolutionary product: Pumpkin Pie Spice, blending all those seasonings into one handy jar. (35)

In 2003, a team at Starbucks led by Peter Dukes, then the Director of Espresso, created Pumpkin Spice Latte. Starbucks was looking for a flavor to drive sales in the fall, and *that* was sure successful! Pumpkin Spice Latte has become Starbucks' most popular seasonal beverage of all time. (36)

Pumpkin Spice flavor has mainstreamed into practically every grocery aisle. There is a “pumpkin spice-ified” flavor of Spam, and “everything from hummus to hard seltzer, marshmallows to mac and cheese,” and, literally, soup to nuts. (37)

What's the next big thing? That is exactly what sophisticated marketing companies are constantly researching with surveys and market analysis. It is not only to understand the past, but to adjust production and marketing so that food and beverage producers will be selling what we are looking for in the future.

I don't know what you are looking for, but there is plenty of data to tell us what we are going to get. Whereas 2025 was the year of protein, with everything from Greek yogurt to Cheerios touting protein grams, 2026 will be the year of fiber.

"Fibermaxxing," which is described as 'a TikTok trend where consumers try to fit as much fiber as possible into a recipe or dish,' is on the rise." Look for labels that mainstream more fiber into products. (38)

Recently recipes featuring cabbage have popped up on my Google feed. It turns out, that was predicted by Pinterest. The website says this year Boomers and Gen Xers will "crown cabbage the new kitchen MVP. Think blistered-edge [cabbage] 'steaks,' kimchi cocktails, and even crispier taco wraps... Their data is backing that up with a 110% increase in searches for 'cabbage dumplings' and a 45% bump for 'cabbage alfredo.'" (39)

I am guessing most Questers are glad about the fiber trend, even if it means cabbage. As numerous as we are, the food industry is paying close attention to Gen Z, people born between 1997 and 2012, who are seen as a "major force shaping food culture." (40)

One reason for that is that Gen Z-ers have "digital-first habits;" (they pay the most attention to TikTok and YouTube Shorts). Brands are advised to create food and marketing "with what feels new, exciting, and highly shareable." (41) It is not just a matter of creating food and beverages that Gen Z will buy, but making it trendy enough that Gen Z will promote it on social media.

To successfully appeal to Gen Z in 2026, marketing gurus advise food and beverage companies to lead with bold flavors such as yuzu citrus, black garlic, and miso caramel, and "creative fusions" of foods such as Korean-Mexican tacos or Middle Eastern cuisine blended with Western street food formats." (42)

The fusion of cuisines, as we have learned, is nothing new. However, it has picked up speed since "the late 20th century when chefs began intentionally blending diverse culinary influences in their kitchens." (43)

"By combining ingredients and techniques from different cultures, chefs can create dishes that are truly one-of-a-kind... One of the hallmarks of fusion cuisine is the use of unexpected flavor pairings. Chefs experiment with contrasting tastes,

textures, and aromas to create dishes that tantalize the taste buds and surprise diners.” (44)

One example of fusion cuisine is Japanese-Peruvian Cuisine or Nikkei. “Originating in Peru, Nikkei cuisine combines Japanese ingredients and techniques with Peruvian flavors, such as tiradito (a Peruvian-style sashimi).” (45)

Many Fort Wayne chefs offer fusion dishes at restaurants including Nawa on the Landing, and Bistro Nota on South Calhoun. (46) Fort Wayne also has a growing number of small Asian Fusion restaurants, including Khai’s Fusion on East State, The Heart of Asian Fusion on Taylor, and Ryu’s Kitchen on Hobson.

A fusion-forward chain has also opened a restaurant on E. Dupont Road on Fort Wayne’s north side: Bibibop. Its offerings include a “Seoul Bowl,” featuring “Korean BBQ Beef, Purple Rice, Bean Sprouts, Roasted Sesame Broccoli, Honey Citrus Kale, Carrots, Cucumber, and Kimchi” and the “Nourish Bowl” featuring “Miso Glazed Salmon, Honey Citrus Kale, Sweet Potato Noodles, Roasted Sesame Broccoli, Black Beans, Carrots, Cucumber, and Pickled Red Onion, finished with Sesame Oil.” (47)

Other Fort Wayne restaurants, independent and chains, advertise as predominantly one type of cuisine, but offer many. For instance, Fort Wayne now has several Korean barbecue restaurants that feature small gas-powered flame grills built into each dining table. A variety of meats, fruits and vegetables are available for guests to cook themselves. However, their menus also offer a variety of Asian choices such as sushi, or shabu-shabu, a Japanese broth-based dish.

Dessert Course – Valentine’s Day Romance

With Valentine’s Day right around the corner, this paper’s dessert course offers options for two local restaurants that are rated “romantic” on Yelp! and feature what sound like great examples of mainstreamed cuisines. To be featured on Yelp! as “romantic,” a restaurant must have a large concentration of reviews mentioning relevant keywords including “romantic,” and “date night.” (48)

My determination of mainstreamed cuisine on the menu is based on what I have learned through this Quest paper, and whether I had to Google a significant number of menu items because I did not know what they were or how to pronounce them.

Here are the two restaurants that I believe will provide both romance and a vibrant cuisine experience:

[Marquee at the Landing](#). From the diversity of cheese options on the appetizer charcuterie board, to an amazing Caesar salad featuring white anchovies, herbed goat cheese and giardiniera, to entrees including swordfish, kimchi meatloaf, and “Angry Mac & Cheese” with Andouille sausage and shrimp, Marquee at the Landing offers cuisine that goes way beyond steak with a baked potato!

Next: [Spoke and Ivy](#), at 1402 W. Main Street. The cocktail menu at Spoke and Ivy signals that this restaurant’s offerings are going to be mindfully crafted to rise above the usual. Their signature Old Fashioned is made with Kentucky Bourbon from a small distillery, sweet vermouth, Turkish Tobacco Bitters, Aztec Chocolate Bitters, and Cynar.

Spoke and Ivy entrees include Milanese Crispy Chicken with Herbed Goat Cheese Smear, Fresno-Honey, Pesto, and Arugula Salad. The menu also features Prime Rib Pho, with Sea Bean, Spicy Cabbage, Pickled Pepper, served with the beefy broth. Among the side dishes paired with other entrees are black eyed peas, asparagus pico, and pomegranate molasses roasted zucchini.

[Ophelias](#), at 1603 N Wells Street, and [Hideout 125](#) located in Woodland Plaza near Dupont Road, both made Yelp’s romantic list. Their menus feature interesting takes on traditional American fare, and their reviews are excellent, but their menus do not appear to offer the same level of unusual as Marquee at the Landing and Spoke and Ivy. I can tell you from experience, however, that if you and your Valentine are *really* hungry you can’t go wrong with Hideout 125’s 30 oz. Waygu Tomahawk steak entree for \$150.00, especially if there are more than the two of you at the table.

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To wash down this feast of a Quest paper topic, I offer a toast to all of the cultures and generations of cooks, chefs, farmers and scientists who cultivated, experimented and perfected the cuisines of this world, to all those who creatively fuse ingredients and recipes into new creations that delight our eyes and our palates, and to all of those who created the means to process and transport foods from around the world to our grocery stores and restaurants.

Cheers and bon appétit!

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