Home on the Range for the Cowboy – the Cook and the Chuck wagon

The great American cowboy calls to mind a multitude of rugged images, which reflect a highly idealized period in American history, in which Americans traversed the largely virgin soil that was the New World and claimed it as their own. When the cowboy first appeared roaming the Great Plains states, the cattle industry was in its infancy. ‘Cowboys’ included a potpourri of ethnicities, including blends of “Anglo, Celtic, Indian, and Hispanic influences”.¹ A commonality was the cowboy code of honor that demanded hospitality and respect for other cowboys and of course, to his horse. Yet despite this strict moral code, years before Hollywood glorified him, the cowboy was seen as a troublesome outcast from ‘civilized’ society that ran rampant and shot at everything he wished. It was not until the cattle industry was far beyond its infancy that this highly masculine cultural figure was recognized as anything but an uncouth ‘other’ with strange eating and living habits. Theirs was a society that lacked a stable home and in which women “seemed wholly out of place”.² Thus, the male cook and his cuisine became the driving force in uniting the men as a group and creating a home for them on the open plains.

Local newspaper reporters from 1870 to 1890 started detailing the appearances and actions of a new American character – the cattle herder, the drover, or as he is known today, the cowboy – with largely negative connotations. The reporters called him “full of strange oaths, free with his cash and his revolver, boisterous, lawless” and unfit for civilized society.³ In so doing, they continually ostracized cowboys from the rest of society. They called them “a peculiar breed. They are distinct in their habits and characteristics from the remainder of even the Texan

¹ Allen, 71
² Adams, Come an’ Get It, 92
³ Allen, 221
population as if they belonged to another race”.

This exoticization of the cowboy is not unlike the way that Americans treated other groups that were different from the norm, that were considered ‘other.’ These groups primarily consisted of one ethnicity rather than a mixture of them, however; in ostracizing the cowboys, Americans assisted in molding them into their own distinct culture. Similarly, in 1848 when the first Cantonese immigrants arrived in San Francisco for the Gold Rush, white Americans stereotyped them and considered them and their food as ‘other’ from themselves and the norm. “Even as hatred and fear toward the Chinese reached its height in California, thousands of tourists flocked to San Francisco’s Chinatown out of curiosity about the ways of this exotic people”. This acknowledged sense of ‘otherness’ actually achieved two things (both for the Chinese immigrants and then a little more than twenty years later for the cowboys) – it kept the new group from joining ‘mainstream’ society, but in so doing it encouraged the group’s cohesion and allowed it to foster its own separate culture. While cowboys are ethnically diverse, their primary cultural identifier has shifted from being Anglo, Irish, Hawaiian, or Hispanic to being a cowboy. In creating their own code, cuisine, and space on the open range, they essentially created their own ethnicity.

In order for a type of food to be called a cuisine, it needs to be a source of community, debate, and conversation. While the cowboy’s diet staples consisted of little more than very strong black coffee, boiled beans, salt pork, fried steaks, ‘sonofabitch stew,’ sourdough biscuits, and the occasional closed-top pie, they and the cook were essential to maintaining morale and group cohesion. Out on the range, “the chuck wagon and its cook were an institution, the indispensable nerve center of any outfit. If ever there was an uncrowned king on the cow range,

---

4 Allen, 221
5 Hsia, 6
6 Long, A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness
7 Conzen, The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.
8 Conzen, The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.
it was the wagon cook…the cook’s word was law”. In a culture in which there was no stable camp, the chuck wagon became the epicenter of cowboy society and home. Meals were a chance for cowboys to relax their sore bodies and converse with their fellow men – “It was the magnet which drew men together”. In addition to being a chief part of any cowboy outfit, the cowboy cook took pride in his work and often competed with other cooks to make the best versions of the classic dishes. Some cooks even carried their sourdough keg from job to job to maintain their reputations.

When cowboys went into town on the rare occasion they often found complaint with the food that restaurants served, because it was so different from the food that they ate on the range. “High on the old-time cowboy’s list of necessities was coffee. He regarded it as essential at every meal, and when he could get it between meals, it contributed to his contentment with life”. He drank this coffee as bitter and as black as possible – “coffee that suited his taste would doubtless be pronounced vile and undrinkable in more refined circles”. The cowboy liked to eat beef that was freshly killed, and fried until well-done. He also preferred “sourdough bread to any other kind. Baking-powder biscuits he could eat with only a mild complaint; buttermilk biscuits were passable”. Moreover, the cowboy-specific dish ‘sonofabitch stew’ was said to have been made with every part of the cow “except the horns, hoofs, and hide” and as a result disgusted the few visitors that had the chance to eat it. These specific acquired tastes and preferences further demonstrate the cowboy’s ‘otherness,’ not only in his livelihood and actions, but also in his diet.

---

9 Adams, *Come an’ Get It*, 5
10 Adams, *Come an’ Get It*, 8
11 Adams, *Come an’ Get It*, 67
12 Adams, *Come an’ Get It*, 68
13 Adams, *Come an’ Get It*, 77
14 Adams, *Come an’ Get It*, 91
The cowboy cook’s method of cooking reflected the simple and scant lifestyle of the cowboy. The method in which the cowboy cook made these meals revolved around a simple campfire with hot coals, a Dutch oven, and few large pots. A depiction of what this simple set up looked like can be seen above. Behind the cook is his ‘chuck box’ which is an essential part of the cooking process, because it carries the cook’s staples such as flour, sourdough keg (which held the constantly fermenting sourdough starter), “coffee, sugar, beans, lard, rice, dried fruit and ‘lick,’” or molasses.15 The cook would use his Dutch oven to fry the steaks, and bake the sourdough biscuits, packing coals from his fire around them to maintain the heat. He boiled the coffee (approximately a handful of grounds to each cup of water) in a three-to-five gallon pot. He would use the same pot for the famous “sonofabitch stew,” which recipe varied depending on the cook’s tastes. It could be cooked in water or beef broth, with an onion or without, with chili peppers or not, but everyone seemed to agree that there shouldn’t be any vegetables – “many arguments have developed about the proper way to make this famous stew. Though perhaps no two cooks would make it exactly alike, each might think his way the best”.16 The traditional ingredients in such a stew were best when from a freshly killed calf rather than a full-grown steer.

15 Adams, Come an’ Get It, 13
16 Adams, Come an’ Get It, 95
The phenomenon of the cowboy, especially due to its presence in cinematic classics, is not limited to the past, and yet the cowboy cook who fries steaks over a fire on the open range sadly is. Since the cowboy’s heyday, however, many organizations such as the Society for Range Management attempt to preserve the cowboy culture, atmosphere, and food on dude ranches where paying guests can spend a week reliving the cowboy dream. It is through their effort that the common American can recreate specialty dishes such as the “Son-Of-A-Bitch- Stew,” which calls for the “1 lb. lean beef, Half a calf heart, 1 ½ lb. calf liver, 1 set sweetbreads, 1 set brains, 1 set marrow gut, salt, pepper, and Louisiana hot sauce” in the SRM Cowboy Cookbook. The recipe does, however, allow for a modern kitchen, requiring a Dutch oven or a deep casserole dish for cooking the stew. One particularly notable staple is missing from the book – black, bitter, and over-brewed coffee, although perhaps the modern cook could make it on his/her own, it is most likely that the editors decided that only ‘real’ cowboys would ever want to make it. The Cowboy Cookbook includes many additions to the typical cowboy diet including a large number of Mexican-influenced dishes, not surprisingly all from Texan ranches. To further emphasize the desire to preserve cowboy culture, the editors included the name and place of the ranch and their brand which provided the recipe. There are also occasional background stories detailing the traditional atmosphere that went with the dishes. Thus, these recipes retain their regionalism while also capturing the past. Similarly, places like Lao’s Czech Bakery preserves the sense of the original culture, but the owners and bakers are not Czech. Despite this, they maintain the legacy of Czech baked goods by following old recipes and providing a space for the elderly Czech community. Likewise, touristy dude ranches allow guests to ‘visit’ cowboy culture.

While ethnically diverse, cowboys created their own specific culture complete with a code for decorum, ways to work, live, and of course, to cook. An ‘ethnic food’ or cuisine does

---

17 Society for Range Management, 82
not need to be from a displaced group of people with a common history and livelihood. It is a uniting factor for groups that are or have been considered ‘other’ by the mainstream.

Bibliography


The Owners of Lao’s Czech Bakery.