

Rachel White
Ethnic Foodways in the U.S.
Final Paper
May 31, 2011

Fusion/Confusion:
Culinary Eugenics and American Cuisine

As Sidney Mintz details in his article, “Eating American,” Americans have always struggled to foster and identify a national cuisine.¹ In the late 1970’s, American chefs tried to create a national cuisine through two very different approaches. The first group, those forging what would later be called “New American Cuisine” looked to old, mostly New England-based, classic dishes. They attempted to elevate and modernize chowder, planked shad, pandowdy and other forgotten or ignored dishes.² The second group argued that those touting New American Cuisine ignored that the American cultural landscape had changed since colonial times. What once would have represented American food did not, in the late 70’s, represent the multitude of ethnicities in America. This second group created fusion cuisine.³ The goal of fusion was to merge and marry the ingredients and techniques of different cultures in one dish. A single dish may include Chinese, Malaysian, French, and Mexican elements. A single dish *could* represent the tapestry of the American experience.

Since the 1970’s fusion cuisine has proliferated from the realm of haute cuisine into more casual restaurant food and even home cooking. As fusion went from being a fad to a reality, restaurant critics developed strong opinions of it. While the positive reaction to fusion cuisine represented acceptance of and excitement for a multi-ethnic

¹ Sidney Mintz, “Eating American,” in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Carnihan (Chicago: Routledge, 2002), 24.

² Molly O’Neill, “Puck’s Pluck,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 1992, accessed March 26, 2011.

³ O’Neill, “Puck’s Pluck.”

America, the negative critical response, brought on by fusion's refusal to exoticism ethnicity, constituted culinary eugenics.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to understand exactly what fusion cuisine is. In fusion food, there is no reverence for ethnic divisions. It assumes that all foodways have more similarities than differences.⁴ All cultures appreciate the interplay between savory, sweet, salty, spicy, bitter and tart. All cultures see eating as a way to create community as well as provide sustenance. Yes, some cultures may have different resources and ingredients. Some cultures may find a food morally repulsive while others cultures may eat the same dish without a second thought (for instance, beef in some parts of Asia, guinea pig in South America). However, there are some basic, universal truths to cooking. Because of that universality, dishes and ingredients from different cultures can mingle in fact, due to increasing globalization, this mingling is a delicious inevitability.

One example of a popular fusion dish is the Korean taco. The universal truth at play is meat, usually beef, grilled quickly over a hot fire. In parts of Mexico and Mexican-America, this truth takes form in dishes such as *carne asada* and it is often served wrapped in a tortilla. In Korea, it is known as *bulgogi* and is usually marinated in garlic, sugar, soy sauce, and sesame oil. The fusion of these two dishes is known as the Korean taco. The tacos use *bulgogi*, with all of its Asian seasonings, and the Mexican corn tortilla and fuse them together into one dish.⁵ Fusion dishes are often more

⁴ Bret Thorn, "Chefs shun the 'f' word, but fusion cuisine takes off," *Nation's Restaurant News* 35 (2001): 47.

⁵ Cyrus Farivar, "How to make Korean tacos at home," California Taco Trucks blog March 31, 2009, <http://californiatacotrucks.com/blog/2009/05/31/how-to-make-korean-tacos-at-home/>.

complicated than this, playing on many universal food truths and incorporating many food cultures.

In the last thirty years, the positive critical response of fusion cuisine has lauded it as the true, American cuisine and thereby praised and embraced the consequences of a diverse America. Often, the chefs who are creating fusion food are multi-ethnic themselves.⁶ Patrick Concannon was an Irish-Mexican-American, French trained chef based in Chicago. He said of fusion cuisine: “I call it simply ‘modern American cooking. For a long time America was the melting pot of cultures. In the past 10 years, it’s become the melting pot of cuisines as well.’”⁷ Some critics argued that fusion cuisine was a pleasant inevitability of multi-ethnic chefs and clientele. William Grimes of *The New York Times* wrote, “Unlike nouvelle cuisine, fusion cuisine never developed a theory. This may be because it is not so much an idea as a fact, a practical response to a global market and increasing global popular culture.”⁸ Grimes argues that, at its best, fusion food embodies a “faith in the people” to be able intermingle the flavors of these cultures.⁹ Amanda Hesser, also of *The New York Times*, expounded on the benefits of fusion cooking. “Fusion made diners reflect on flavors and their context, and it felt like a natural advance for American cooks, who had always relied on adopted foodways.”¹⁰ Chef Mary Sue Milliken said of fusion food, “We are America. Mixing things up is sort of our

⁶ Marcus Samuelsson, another chef famous in the fusion food movement, is Ethiopian, but raised in Sweden by Swedish parents. He studied in Switzerland and Austria and runs a Japanese fusion restaurant. Even Wolfgang Puck, considered one of the creators of fusion embodies multi-ethnicity. He is Austrian, but trained in Italy and spent most of his life in California. Roy Yamaguchi, another important figure in Fusion cooking, is Japanese but trained classical French cooking in New York and now lives in Hawaii.

⁷ William Rice, “Fusion fare Modern cooking pot is a melting pot of multi-cultural cuisine,” *Florida Times Union*, January 22, 1998, accessed May 26, 2011.

⁸ William Grimes, “Inventing American All Over Again,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2003, accessed May 26, 2011.

⁹ Grimes, “Inventing American All Over Again.”

¹⁰ Amanda Hesser, “Fusion as it Used to Be, but More Exotic,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2004, accessed May 26, 2011.

nature. And if fusion cooking helps us explore and understand other cultures better, it's worth it." These chefs and critics recognized fusion cuisine as an inevitable consequence of globalization. As people intermingled, so did their food.

However, the negative critical response to fusion cuisine represents the segregationist and nativist backlash to a multi-ethnic America. Soon after it originated fusion became to critics as "confusion."¹¹ These critics attacked the universal truth principle of fusion. They argued that simply because globalization had given Americans excess to all of these ethnic ingredients did not mean that they should be used together. Fusion dishes were often describe as "muddy" and "too complicated."¹² In a review of a Japanese fusion restaurant, Amanda Hesser refers to clutter: the pairings and mixtures of cultures that do not go well together. She that foie gras and sushi writes were "compatible as Bush and Kerry." Other critics reflected a similar message and vocabulary. One review stated "...fusion developed a bad reputation...It came to mean food that was neither one thing nor another, in which marriage of cultured blurred their distinctiveness and created a mush rather than a genuinely new cuisine."¹³ Another stated that fusion merely "waters down" the cuisine of origin.¹⁴ In 1999, French chef Paul Bocuse proclaimed that any cuisine that combines different elements from different traditions to be "confusion cuisine."¹⁵ Chef Susan Feniger wrote: "[I have] always been opposed to fusion cooking... There is a maturing among cooks, but while some combinations work, in many the flavors are muddy, not clear and concise. We still prefer to focus on a single cuisine

¹¹ Thorn, 47.

¹² Stephanie Lyness, "Japanese Cuisine That's Suited for Fusion," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2005, accessed May 26, 2011.

¹³ William Grimes, "Inventing American All Over Again".

¹⁴ Rice, "Fusion fare Modern cooking pot is a melting pot of multi-cultural cuisine."

¹⁵ Thorn, 47.

and learn to re-create what's pure and authentic.”¹⁶ As fusion food never claimed to be authentic and therefore is not bastardizing a single culture, this language was highly segregationist and racist. These chefs and critics argued for racial purity and said that a mix of the cultures causes “confusion” and “clutter.”¹⁷

This response to fusion cuisine was “culinary eugenics.” Eugenicians, starting at the end of the 19th century, argued that there were fundamental differences between races and those differences should not be adulterated through interbreeding. While some many eugenicians used the theory to argue for the superiority of the white race and the eradication of other races, others argued for celebrating and cultivating all races, but separately.¹⁸ These cultural pluralists, such as Horace Kallen, argued that immigrants should celebrate their “psycho-physical inheritance” and that discouraging interbreeding could act as a “shield” against modernization.¹⁹ These theories construct race as intractable and best left pure. Just as those critical of fusion cuisine do not argue that, for example, French cuisine is superior to Chinese and therefore should not mix, cultural pluralist eugenicians do not argue that one nationality is inherently superior to another. These critics and cultural pluralists argue that each ethnicity has inherent qualities that are best kept separate from other ethnicities.

The root of this negative reaction was that fusion cuisine challenged the exoticization of ethnic foods. The more standard conception of ethnic food, of an authentic, foreign cuisine, was dominated by the cosmopolitanism associated with exoticism. Kristen Hoganson writes: “However much may have seemed to elide

¹⁶ Rice, “Fusion fare Modern cooking pot is a melting pot of multi-cultural cuisine.”

¹⁷ Hesser, “Fusion as Used to Be, But More Exotic.”

¹⁸ Laura Doyle. “The Long Arm of Eugenics” *American Literary History* 16 (Fall 2004) 524.

¹⁹ Doyle, 528.

difference, foreign entertainments reinforced it.”²⁰ Ethnic food was popular, in part, because it was entirely different from “American” cuisine. The two had no universality. Lucy Long identifies “culinary tourism” as the ethos much ethnic food consumption. Culinary tourism is dependent on creating an “other” and highlighting the differences between oneself and the other. She writes: “Foods are not inherently strange or exotic, the experiences of an individual are not what determine the status of foods. In this sense, tourism depends on a perception of otherness rather than an objective reality of an item’s relationship to that individual.”²¹ Fusion cuisine’s commitment the universality of foods did not allow ethnic food to be exoticized. Therefore, it presented a threat to the mainstream conception of ethnic food.

Conceptions of ethnic food reflect conceptions of ethnicity.²² This historic exoticization of ethnic food highlighted the differences between cultures, a eugenicist principle. Therefore, when fusion challenged those differences, critics responded with culinary eugenics. By arguing that different ethnicities have common ground, fusion cuisine challenged culinary eugenics.

²⁰ Kristen L. Hoganson, “Entertaining Difference: Popular Geography in Various Guises,” *Consumer’s Imperium: The Global Production of Domesticity, 1865-1920*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007,) 125.

²¹ Lucy M. Long, “Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness,” *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long (University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 24.

²² Hoganson, 120.

Bibliography

Doyle, Laura. "The Long Arm of Eugenics." *American Literary History* 16 (Fall 2004): 520-545.

Farivar, Cyrus. "How to make Korean tacos at home," California Taco Trucks blog March 31, 2009, <http://californiatacotrucks.com/blog/2009/05/31/how-to-make-korean-tacos-at-home/>.

Grimes, William. "Inventing American All Over Again." *The New York Times*, March 26, 2003. Accessed May 26, 2011.

Hesser, Amanda. "Fusion as it Used to Be, but More Exotic." *The New York Times*. March 10, 2004. accessed May 26, 2011.

Hoganson, Kristen L. "Entertaining Difference: Popular Geography in Various Guises." In *Consumer's Imperium: The Global Production of Domesticity, 1865-1920*. 105-151. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Lyness, Stephanie. "Japanese Cuisine That's Suited for Fusion." *The New York Times*. December 11, 2005. Accessed May 26, 2011.

Long, Lucy M. "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness." In *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long. 20-50. University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

Mintz, Sidney. "Eating American" In *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Carnihan. 22-43. Chicago: Routledge, 2002.

O'Neill, Molly. "Puck's Pluck." *The New York Times*. September 27, 1992. Accessed March 26, 2011.

Rice, William. "Fusion fare Modern cooking pot is a melting pot of multi-cultural cuisine." *Florida Times Union*. January 22, 1998. Accessed May 26, 2011.

Thorn, Bret. "Chefs shun the 'f' word, but fusion cuisine takes off." *Nation's Restaurant News* 35 (2001): 47.