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America's Great New Food Craze

Once criticized for their traditional "meat and potatoes" mentality, many consumers now are seeking better quality, greater variety—and much more enjoyment—at mealtime.

Americans are caught up in a food craze that is transforming old eating habits and pumping billions into firms that cater to the nation's appetite.

As never before, consumers look upon food and its preparation as an exciting and enjoyable pastime, devoting more time and energy to it.

Cooking classes are bulging as people seek hints on exotic foreign dishes, nouvelle cuisine and foods with distinctively U.S. flavors.

Appliance makers can't turn out enough of the cookware and gadgets that people want to prepare and display their creations—many inspired by the colorful pages of cookbooks and food magazines.

Supermarkets are stocking a wider range of fresh produce, seafood, ethnic

products and packaged foods with more natural ingredients. Restaurants—even moderately priced ones—are ranging far afield of meat-and-potatoes fare to meet more-sophisticated tastes.

In short, Americans, criticized in the past for uninspired diets, now demand more variety, quality and nutrition for the nearly 400 billion dollars they spend annually on food and drink.

"Americans are suddenly discovering a great interest in food and wines," says Dorothy Holland, vice president of consumer affairs for Kraft, Inc. "Like the French, we are developing a more discriminating taste and viewing food preparation more as an experience."

Nowhere are the changes more evident than in supermarkets. It is not uncommon to find markets carrying



Brunch at Washington's Americus restaurant, which features regional fare.

produce that until recently could be found only in specialty stores: Alfalfa sprouts, bok choy, garbanzo beans, kiwis, kumquats, oyster mushrooms, parsnips, rutabagas, shallots and a variety of squashes.

"I've been in this business all my life and I've never seen more desire for variety," notes Art Alexandria of Pedi Brothers, a produce wholesaler in Franklin Park, Ill., a Chicago suburb. The firm, which sells 2,800 kinds of fruits and vegetables, most of them to supermarkets, reports that sales are up 30 percent this year.

Seafood counters also are getting more lavish. Although 70 percent of fish is still eaten in restaurants, many stores have started developing and displaying recipes to show shoppers how easy it is to prepare fresh fish themselves.

Guide to eating. Stores also are doing a better job telling consumers about nutrition. Typical is a new 70-page shopping guide by First National Supermarkets, which owns Finast stores in New England and New York and Pick & Pay in Ohio. The booklet helps consumers determine calories, fat and sodium in products by matching symbols in the booklet with similar markings on grocery shelves.

Such trends, nutritionists say, reflect a clear improvement in eating habits. Government figures show that people are eating less beef, eggs and butter—all high in fat and cholesterol. More people also are staying away from sugar, salt and coffee. In contrast, consumption of fresh produce, poultry, fish, juices and skim milk is up. Says nutri-



In restaurants, diners now are more likely to choose lighter, less fattening foods.

CHUCK HARRITY—USNEWS



MARION TRENGSLO—USNEWS



Cooking schools are crammed with students eager to hone their culinary skills.

tionist Jean Mayer, president of Tufts University: "A decade ago, I said America was a nation of nutrition illiterates. I don't feel that way now. There is tremendous knowledge of nutrition and food and their relationships to health, and we are seeing the impact of this change in the decline in heart disease."

Along with greater interest in nutrition goes the desire for new taste experiences and better quality. Ethnic foods—particularly Italian, Mexican and Chinese dishes—are selling fast. The Market Research Corporation of America, a Chicago firm that conducts a census of what families eat, notes that in-home eating of ethnic foods has increased 47 percent since 1972.

Food firms have rushed to bring out lines of ethnic dishes, including a Fiesta Grande line of frozen Italian and Mexican dinners by Pillsbury and a new one-serving pizza by Quaker Oats' Celeste. Del Monte stresses that its expanding Chun King line has no artificial flavoring or preservatives. More stores also are stocking tofu, the soybean-curd product that was recently the center of controversy when government officials suggested it as a protein substitute in school lunches.

When the choice at supermarkets isn't enough, consumers are quick to go elsewhere. Doing a booming business are gourmet shops that sell exotic meats, fish, baked goods, homemade pasta and Italian ice cream.

Typical is Halpern's in Atlanta, which sells many

kinds of caviar, pâté, smoked fish and imported vegetables. Says Lynne Halpern: "Food is so expensive anyway, people reason why not spend more for quality?"

In Detroit, Joseph Solaka, co-owner of two Ye Olde Butcher Shoppe stores, adds: "What we hear people saying is, 'Your stuff is expensive,

but we know we're getting what we pay for.'"

Health-food stores also are prospering. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that the number of such outlets has grown from about 1,200 in 1968 to some 7,500 today.

The biggest chain, the Pittsburgh-based General Nutrition Centers, has 1,000 stores, 200 of which opened this year, and sales are expected to hit 300 million dollars, up from 240 million in 1980. The stores have 50 kinds of juices, cookies and crackers made with whole grains, and "wilderness packs" of dried fruits, coconut, soybeans and nuts.

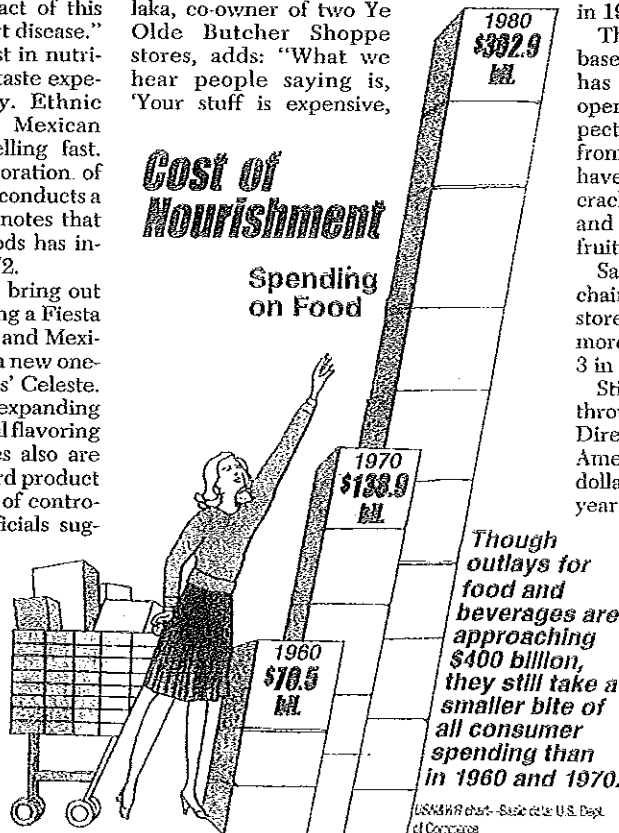
Says David Shakarian, company chairman: "People can come in our stores and for less than a dollar get more nutrition than if they spent 2 or 3 in a fast-food place."

Still other people buy their food through the mail. According to the Direct Mail Marketing Association, Americans buy at least 500 million dollars' worth of food by mail each year. In Stanardsville, Va., for example, Virginia Veal Farms has doubled its business annually over the last four years, selling veal and chicken by mail. The average order: \$200.

Shoppers also are going directly to farmers, notes Peter Henderson of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He says meat is normally 15 percent cheaper when bought from a farmer and vegetables 50 percent less. But quality and freshness are perhaps the

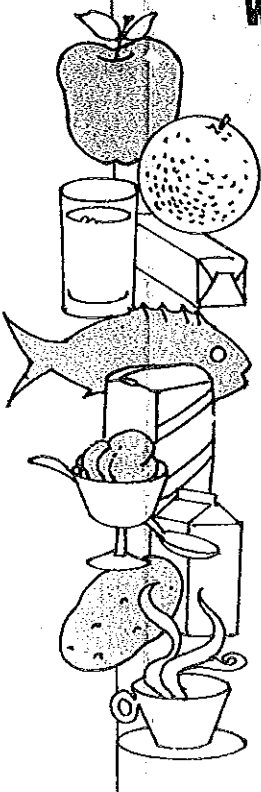
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What Americans Eat: Changes Over 10 Years



Foods More in Demand . . .

| | Consumption Per Person In 1970 | 1980 | Change in 10 Years |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Yogurt | 13.6 oz. | 41.8 oz. | +207.4% |
| Soft drinks | 24.0 gal. | 37.8 gal. | + 57.5% |
| Frozen citrus juices* | 22.2 lb. | 34.1 lb. | + 53.6% |
| Cheese | 16.7 lb. | 22.1 lb. | + 32.3% |
| Chicken | 40.4 lb. | 50.0 lb. | + 23.8% |
| Fresh vegetables | 91.4 lb. | 99.9 lb. | + 9.3% |
| Frozen vegetables | 9.6 lb. | 10.4 lb. | + 8.3% |
| Fresh fruits | 78.6 lb. | 84.0 lb. | + 6.9% |
| Wheat flour | 111.0 lb. | 117.0 lb. | + 5.4% |
| Fish | 6.9 lb. | 7.9 lb. | + 14.5% |
| Margarine | 10.8 lb. | 11.2 lb. | + 3.7% |
| Skim milk | 11.8 lb. | 11.9 lb. | + 0.9% |

. . . And Some That Have Faded

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|--------|
| Ice cream | 17.6 lb. | 17.3 lb. | - 1.7% |
| Potatoes | 74.8 lb. | 73.3 lb. | - 2.0% |
| Canned vegetables | 51.1 lb. | 49.8 lb. | - 2.5% |
| Beef | 84.1 lb. | 76.5 lb. | - 9.0% |
| Eggs | 300 | 264 | -12.0% |
| Butter | 5.3 lb. | 4.4 lb. | -17.0% |
| Cane and beet sugar | 101.7 lb. | 83.6 lb. | -17.8% |
| Coffee* | 13.7 lb. | 10.4 lb. | -24.1% |
| Whole milk | 213.3 lb. | 143.5 lb. | -32.7% |
| Veal | 2.4 lb. | 1.5 lb. | -37.5% |
| Lamb and mutton | 2.9 lb. | 1.3 lb. | -55.2% |

*Amount is pounds of fresh fruit or green coffee beans required in production.
U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT—Based on U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

main reasons for such purchases, notes Henderson, who cites a jump in the number of farmers' markets and roadside stands in states like Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts and New York.

In cities, families with time to spare are joining food-buying clubs in which members take turns visiting wholesale markets to get fresh produce and such goods as sugar, flour and dried fruit in bulk. The Cooperative League of the USA estimates that there are as many as 7,000 consumer food co-ops and buying clubs.

Food preparation at home is only one part of the shifting trend in America's dietary habits. More than 25 percent of the food dollar is spent on restaurant meals—up from about 21 percent a decade ago. Here, too, the accent is on nutrition, quality and variety.

Plus for industry. Menu surveys by *Restaurants & Institutions*, a Chicago trade magazine, show a move away from red meat and more interest in fish, veal, soup, quiche, salad and vegetable appetizers. Editor Jane Wallace says the growing trend toward healthier fare is a big plus for the industry, noting: "With consumers wanting lighter food, which costs less, operators are able to keep their menu prices lower."

Among the most popular of restaurants are seafood establishments. The Red Lobster chain has grown from only three outlets in 1970 to 300 now, with annual sales of about 525 million dollars. "We're the biggest seafood

consumers in the country," asserts public-relations manager George Cone.

Traditional fast-food establishments continue to grow, but they are expanding from hamburgers to chicken, fish, salads and breakfast fare. Some, such as Long John Silver's, are experimenting with increasing their number of baked dishes. Chains featuring ethnic foods are among the fastest growing, with PepsiCo's Taco Bell counting some 1,400 outlets in its chain.

Restaurants are responding to consumer tastes by featuring locally grown products and lighter meals, a trend described by some restaurateurs as America's nouvelle-cuisine movement.

Line fishing. At Rosellini's Other Place, a Seattle restaurant, Robert Rosellini has set up a company that fishes with hook and line, a method he says insures top quality. He also raises his own vegetables, lamb and calves for veal. "Everything is done on the local level," he says. "Everything is fresh." Customers seem to appreciate that. Business is up 14 percent so far this year, even at \$40 for a four-course meal.

A restaurant opened by Michael Grisanti in Louisville in January also features local products, including trout brought in daily by a farmer. The restaurateur, who owns two other restaurants, makes his own pasta and is building hydroponic systems to grow herbs.

New restaurants are being designed around the concept of regional American tastes. Americus, in the newly renovated Sheraton Washington Hotel in the nation's capital, features venison, smoked trout, buffalo, pompano and snapper, as well as sauces made with bourbon instead of wine. Says executive



Supermarkets have expanded their produce sections to give shoppers more choices.



Cookbooks of every style and ethnic flavor are among the fastest sellers at most bookstores.

chef Reed Groban: "American food isn't just fried chicken and hamburgers."

The country's fascination with food goes beyond the mere eating of it. Billions of dollars are spent each year on the trappings that go with mealtimes. More than 20 percent of homes are equipped with microwave ovens, and sales this year are expected to rise to more than 4.5 million units, up from 3.5 million last year. Predictions are that by 1985, microwaves, designed with working couples in mind, will be in half of U.S. homes.

Also growing in popularity: Food processors, convection ovens, deep fryers, better-quality cutlery, coffee grinders, waffle irons and pasta makers. In all, Americans last year spent 3.6 billion dollars on electric appliances, cookware and bakeware.

Willing buyers. "All of this stuff is expensive, but it doesn't seem to bother anybody," says Chuck Williams, owner of kitchen-appliance stores in California and other states. In addition to smaller items, the company in the past year sold individuals about 100 restaurant-style ranges—costing \$1,500 to \$3,000 each.

In Bloomington, Ind., people are making up for the lack of choice in restaurants by preparing more-exotic foods at home, notes Charlotte Zeitlow, co-owner of Goods, Inc., a business that has prospered by selling cooking equipment, such as woks and food processors. Says Zeitlow: "We have a constant stream of people who come in here and say, 'I know I shouldn't buy this, but I know I'll use it.'"

Cookbooks are selling fast, many mirroring the new interest in nutrition and ethnic foods. Three of the top 15 best sellers on the *New York Times* list deal with nutrition. Among new titles: *The Complete Gourmet Nutrition Cookbook*, *All About Steam Cooking*, *Gourmet Cooking Without Salt*, *The Nouvelle Cuisine Cookbook*, *Cookbook from a Melting Pot* and *Whole Earth Cooking for the '80s*.

"We are seeing a trend in interest in American cookbooks," says Kate Siegel Bandos of Pelican Publishing Company, a Louisiana firm with 26 cookbooks on its list. "People are realizing that America has wonderful things."

HP Books, a Tucson publisher, has 35 cookbooks in print—eight of them new this year. Cookbooks represent 60 percent of the firm's sales, up from 10 percent six years ago. "I don't know where all these budding authors are coming from, but we get at least one cookbook manuscript a day," says company founder Helen Fisher.

Newspapers also have expanded their food sections, and food magazines are adding subscribers by the droves. The pacesetter is *Bon Appetit*, a Los Angeles-based monthly that has grown in circulation from 240,000 to 1.3 million over the past five years. Pages of advertising increased from 349 in 1977 to 1,040 this year, making it one of the hottest magazines in publishing.

Its editor, Paige Rense, says cooking has become a creative outlet, adding: "Because of the high costs of eating

out, people are entertaining more at home, and they want to do it well."

Cooking classes are booming, too. There are an estimated 2,500 cooking schools in the U.S. "We get women who are just tired of pan-fried round steak with smothered onions and brown gravy that their mothers taught them how to cook," says Terry Thompson, a cooking teacher in Lafayette, La. "They're tired of cooking the same old things."

Will the new interest in food and nutrition continue? Most experts think so, especially with demographic shifts pointing to small families with more to spend and a society dominated by adults with more-sophisticated tastes.

Wider travel also is introducing more people to new kinds of foods, notes Doris Eby, a food editor of *Better Homes & Gardens*. Like other food analysts, she sees a continued interest in quality convenience foods for weekdays because of the increase in the number of working women, but along with that is a strong desire to splurge on gourmet meals for the weekends.

"People may eat rather routinely during the week because of busy schedules," says Eby, "but the attitude now is that there will be something special on the weekend." □

By LAWRENCE D. MALONEY and JEANNIE THORNTON

How Food Suppliers Keep Up With Trends

No one keeps a closer watch on changes in America's palate than the food companies.

Greater consumer interest in nutrition led the Kellogg Company this year to introduce four whole-grain, flaked cereals—its biggest new-product campaign ever, costing the firm some 50 million dollars.

Del Monte has a new line of Lite canned fruits with syrup containing 50 percent less added sugar and a third fewer calories. A new Ibbey's fruit line is packed in natural juices.

Castle & Cooke packs 50 percent of its canned tuna in water instead of oil; three years ago, virtually all was packed in oil. Quaker Oats' syrup sales are up 50 percent since it introduced Aunt Jemima Lite pancake syrup. Heinz is test marketing ketchup with half the normal calories.

In frozen entrees, Stouffer's has introduced its Lean Cuisine line of single-serving meals—all with fewer than 300 calories.

With the market for nutritious snacks growing nearly 10 percent annually, Kellogg's has bought the

marketing rights to Le Shake, a new yogurt drink. General Mills is test marketing Fruit Roll-Ups, a chewy snack made from real fruit, and Quaker Oats has its Chewy Granola Bars, a nutritious snack of rolled oats, nuts and honey.

Kraft is test marketing precooked entrees with no preservatives that are packed in pouches and need only to be boiled in water. Lipton has new caffeine-free herbal teas.

General Foods hopes within a year to introduce low-calorie powdered beverages, using Aspartame, an artificial sweetener recently approved by the government. The firm also is among several that plan to label products that are high in salt.

Such steps are among many being taken in a business known for sharp competition. "The volume of food consumed by the population grows only about 1 percent a year," says food analyst Nancy Smith of the Arthur D. Little consulting firm in Cambridge, Mass. "The only way firms can increase their share is to take it away from someone else."