

Fast Food Takes Its Place

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If someone asked you to name the great cuisines of the world, What would you say? Chinese food or Indonesian food, of course, is famous and delicious. Italians are world-renowned. Greek food has its own following. What about America?

Well, what comes to mind when you hear the words "American cuisine"? Personally, I think of the 1950's drive-up restaurants, with milkshakes and old-fashioned hamburgers and Coney Islands dripping in mustard. That's probably not the typical definition for the word "cuisine", but it definitely defines American food. But wait a second. What does the word "cuisine" mean, exactly? The textbook definition is "A characteristic manner or style of preparing food." According to that, there's nothing more American than a hamburger, large fries, and a chocolate milkshake. That meal, served in its own greasy white paper bag, might just be the epitome of everything that is American.

American fast food chains have spread all over the world. They are a symbol of western life in far-off lands, a landmark, loved or hated, by tourists and natives alike. Even the French, who carefully monitor each word that enters their language, have allowed in "hamburger" and "hotdog" to refer to these distinctly American treasures. What exactly is so appealing about this distinctly American tradition of hot, greasy, tasty food on the run?

For one thing, fast food has a constancy about it. Every time you order a cheeseburger from a particular restaurant chain, you know what that cheeseburger is going to taste like. If someone mentions fast food french fries, you can immediately imagine the taste in your mouth and the striped paper pouch in which they arrive, complete with a layer of salt collected at the bottom and that one short, squat little fry, overdone and sharp at the edges. In a constantly changing society, it seems, Americans and others all over the world derive a real comfort from knowing exactly what they are getting. It's the same thing they've been getting since childhood.

Secondly, the massive appeal of fast food comes from the fact that it is, indeed, fast. Where else but America could such a thing have developed? We're a busy people, with multiple jobs and deadlines and kids and responsibilities, and knowing that we can pick up pre-cooked, steamy hot food in a bag and bring it home to satisfy hunger with minimum fuss is definitely appealing. You technically don't even need to dirty your silverware.

It may be unhealthy, and it may be expensive, and it may be contributing to the decline of Americans sitting down to dinner together every night. But let's face it- like the gas-gobbling SUVs we love to drive, Americans have a dichotomy of love and hate with most of the things they've created. And fast food, in all of its greasy glory, is here to stay.

Besides, sometimes it's a wonderful thing to be able to overcome your guilt, forget about your arteries for just a minute, and buy yourself a burger. And maybe even super-size it. After all, it's the American way.