Nationalism, Culinary Coherence and the Case of the United States: An Empirical or Conceptual Problem?

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Introduction

There is no coherent narrative, easily accessible, when addressing American national cuisine. Familiar narrative tropes of history and anthropology—continuity and change over the longue durée, a before and after analysis after a seminal political or economic event, the tireless burden of one group or the status benefits of another—can address elements but do not really help to connect the dots or create a definitive road map. There may not be a ‘there’ there, no evident system that integrates identity (American) with culinary practices (shared ingredients, techniques, and dishes). Without a clearly identifiable set of components and with no clear mode of integration, does it, in fact exist? It could not be said of the United States, though, that her vast geography has never been integrated through national projects from the concrete to the abstract: parks, roadways, and bridges, public education, military might. Perhaps, though, the problem of a national cuisine for the United States lies in the necessary reliance on the everyday acts of its citizens as much as the explicit efforts of the nation-state in order for its existence. As in the question, if you build it, will they come, what about if everyone does not make the same food or identify the food they make as uniquely American, does a national cuisine exist?

The problem, then, might be one of culture not of politics. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson defines cuisine as a “cultural construct that systematizes culinary practices and transmutes the spontaneous culinary gesture into a stable cultural code” (2004: 3). She uses this definition to help explain the strength and solidity of French cuisine, arguably a world-renowned national cuisine, one, as she points out, embedded in the initial development of the French nation; the stories of the acts of revolution themselves, the attempts to overthrow monarchy and replace it with democracy, were associated with food: “let them eat cake.” Food reproduces and reinforces ideas of French-ness both as culture and nation: “the cuisine of France … is greater than the sum of its parts” (2004: 6). The concept of American culture does not begin to
have the same coherence as in the French case. This might be due to the heterogeneity of the constructs of both culture and nation: France is smaller in scope and scale, more homogenous in its people, and more centralized in its political organization. In the United States, there are so many (literally) moving parts—people, identities, ingredients, traditions, expectations, structures of government.

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz tackled the ‘problem’ of American national cuisine with vigor and helped frame many subsequent scholarly investigations (1997). He does not think an array of dishes can be cobbled together to create a cuisine. His issue, like Parkhurst Ferguson’s, is one of coherence. For Mintz, it is the lack of integrated communities involved in a shared dialogue about what defines both the food and the group which reveals the void, the no ‘there’ there. His definition of coherence is grass-roots; it has to happen in practical ways, in shared customs and traditions. The case for an American national cuisine falls apart because of a lack of shared discourse and practice, never mind whether there is any type of nationalist project around food. In some sense, he sees American cuisine as always disparate and inchoate—regional foodways, industrial foods, restaurant haute cuisine—and this is not a failure of the American people or their practices but an accurate reflection of how cultures and cuisines actually work; there is no guarantee of a national cuisine if contemporary socio-political organization is defined by nation-states. His skepticism extends beyond the particular problems of the American case. Any definition of a national cuisine is a “holistic artifice” (1996: 104).

There might be a middle way, a means of identifying certain nationalistic elements in both the discourses and practices around food in the United States. Krishnendu Ray (2008) explores this possibility by making an empirical investigation of the connection between discourse and practice in one place: New York City. In his excellent summary of Mintz’s main arguments, he identifies four conceptual problems interfering with any idea of an American national cuisine: spatial bounding (it is too big); temporal continuity (it is too new and there are too many new people); systemic coherence (there are too many elements); and self-consciousness (we do not have a deep or long investment) (2008: 264). He focuses on the final point, self-consciousness, and uses fine-dining restaurants as the case study, and discussions in print media for the evidence. He compares the discussions of restaurants and French cuisine and restaurants and American cuisine over a 150-year period. He finds a growing self-awareness of the category, American cuisine, especially in contrast to the long powerful association between fine-dining restaurants and French cuisine. So, an American national cuisine might exist when people try to articulate a vision that is distinct from other, perhaps more coherent cuisines (Ray, 2008: 288–90). There is something to be said for a structural necessity of an ‘other’ when it comes to the idea of any cuisine, since opposition (in most cases, for example, the monarchy, the colonial rule) and differentiation (in all cases, for example, from neighbors big and small) is built into the nationalist project.

However, what if the problems of an American national cuisine were seen as the necessary elements for understanding and possibly defining it? Thus, perhaps it exists only in differentiation from the other nations and in contrast to the everyday practices and identities that are more compelling predictors of what happens. Thus, American
cuisine is regional, it is industrial, it is polyglot, and we often, but not always, care about it. That just might be its national identity, even if this does not fit into definitions based on coherent projects of the nation-state. In some sense, an American national cuisine exists if we change the categories by which we connect the dots between a definition of nation and an idea of cuisine. But there is the vexed issue of now versus then—do certain historical conditions need to be in place in order to make sense of a contemporary case? Looking closely at New England, one of the earliest regions to be fully colonized, the home of early nationalistic fervor, the site of the Boston Tea Party—our moment of comradery with the French (not cake or bread but tea), and a region with rich agrarian and industrial histories—can help build, in the style of Ray’s empirical analysis of New York City restaurants, a possible case for a redefined American national cuisine. In this case, the evidence comes from several empirical investigations of regional food practices occurring over a decade. The first was part of a qualitative exploration of place-based foods such as maple syrup and artisan cheese (including interviews and participant-observation), and the second was in concert with other food researchers based in New England interested in developing tools for sugarmakers, cheesemakers, and chefs (including surveys, interviews, and focus groups) (Trubek, 2008, 2016; Lahne and Trubek, 2014; DiStefano and Trubek, 2015). The final inquiry was historical; this was an examination of regional cookbooks and other primary source materials in order to better understand everyday practices (Trubek, 2017). Thus, there is specific knowledge of New England iconic foods and regional cuisine; but as in Mintz’s essay, *Cuisine: High and Low and Not at All*, it can also be used to consider the larger query as to whether an American national cuisine is possible or feasible.

The historical case of New England

So, if nationalism is a project and cuisine is a system, how do they connect or not connect in New England? This is a region in the northeastern United States encompassing six states: Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. There is only one major metropolitan area in this region—Boston—and large rural areas including farms, mostly relatively small (by American standards). The regional population is fourteen and a half million, again relatively small by American standards, but two times more than the population of Denmark and Costa Rica, both nation-states known for at least iconic national foods, if not complex cuisines. One way to answer this question as to the optimal connection between nationalism and cuisine is with a historical narrative, considering them rooted in the past and then focusing on emergence: we need to identify the development of a coherent system, an integrated set of practices, and a shared self-referenced discourse. Another way is to do a scan of the geographical region: how can we search for evidence of examples—foods, dishes, and stories—that reflect or reinforce a nationalist project and a cuisine?

Historian Harvey Levenstein’s history of American cuisine, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (2003), argues that the British provided the original structure for any American cuisine, which might be understood as ironic,
since it was a rebellion against the oppressive hand of British rule, especially taxation without representation, that led to the creation of this nation, the United States of America. As Levenstein puts it, there was political liberation but “Americans never liberated themselves from the British culinary heritage” (2003: 3). The British influence is particularly strong in the regional cuisine of New England, for reasons mentioned above. The historically persistent elements—the legacy of the British—can be seen in a generally bland diet that relies heavily on preparing and eating large cuts of meat and consuming vegetables that have been cooked or preserved and not served fresh. There is also a long-term dedication to sweetened foods. Certain dishes remain iconic to the region and reveal this legacy: Boston Baked Beans, New England Boiled Dinner, Yankee Pot Roast, Apple Pie. All these dishes reflect their historical longevity in both techniques and ingredients. Boston Baked Beans are cooked slowly in a ceramic pot (traditionally in a wood fired oven or hearth); other than dried beans the other ingredients are maple syrup, pork fat and yellow mustard. The New England Boiled Dinner takes vegetables (carrots, potatoes, cabbage, onions) and an inexpensive cut of beef or pork and cooks them in water on the stove top (this dish is remarkably like the French Pot au Feu). Yankee Pot Roast is a variation on a theme; in this case an inexpensive, not fatty cut of beef is braised with wine, tomatoes, or beef stock in the oven with root vegetables (carrots, turnips, potatoes, onions) until tender.

Thus, the desire for forms of freedom from oppression and the search for religious tolerance that propelled many of the early colonists to New England did not extend to matters of cuisine. The investment in reproducing the British culinary style meant that early colonists took great pains to bring over the necessary ingredients—wheat, cattle, pigs, chickens, apples—so that dishes like Yankee Pot Roast and Apple Pie could be made. The taste of the familiar was powerful, instigating efforts small and large. For example, the early colonial period is characterized by small farms and village settlements based primarily on subsistence patterns of food production. In the earlier phases of settlement, the patterns tended to involve more clustered farms and village settlements. A Vermont hill farm, for example, would include a few dairy cows, backyard chickens for eggs and meat, a small orchard, primarily of apple trees, and a vegetable plot with carrots, potatoes, and other root vegetables. By the early 1800s, settlers wanted larger tracts of land and greater independence. A more substantial Vermont farm, such as John Whittemore’s one hundred acres near Saint Albans in the northwest of the state, also produced wheat, oats, potatoes, and raised a herd of cattle, most sold to middlemen serving urban markets (Albers, 2000: 139–40). Other than potatoes, all these animals and plants were originally imported from England, thus building a new cuisine rooted in the British one. This was no mean feat, given that in those days, all imported goods were transported in wooden boats, powered only by wind.

The first cookbook published in America by an American author (rather than a reproduction of an already published British one such as the very popular book, The Art of Cooking Made Plain and Simple by Hannah Glasse, first published in 1747) was Amelia Simmon’s American Cookery, published in 1796. The last lines of the book’s subtitle are “Adapted to this country and all grades of life.” She continued
the now established assumption that this new nation’s cuisine was rooted in the culinary traditions of European forbearers. The first four recipes are about roasting meat: beef, mutton, beef, and lamb. The author goes on to explore fish, and then subsequent sections include roots and vegetables, beans, peas, herbs, cakes, and pastries.

Cookbooks, however, are prescriptive documents that do not easily reveal whether these recipes were actively used by early settlers or villagers. Martha Ballard’s diary, bridging the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, does provide rich detail about the everyday diet of a Yankee family (a term used for inhabitants of New England) during early decades of the new nation. Ballard, made well known by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s compelling story of her life as a midwife, wrote often in her diary about gardening and cooking. She wrote every day for twenty-seven years, beginning in 1785 (Vileisis, 2008: 12–16), and very often, the subject was the process of getting food from farm to plate: “she spread manure, pulled weeds, noticed sprouts, and then picked, cooked, and savored the first string beans of the season” (Vileisis, 2008: 21–22). Her diet was resolutely British; she cultivated and consumed cabbages, beets, carrots, string beans, onions, and most days her meals included eating some type of meat. On April 13, 1794, we “cookt a legg of pork” and on May 11, 1800 she “cookt the head and harslett of a Veal which we killd yesterday” (Ballard, n.d.). She was fifty when she started the diary; she had already lived through British colonial rule, the Revolutionary War, and was just beginning as an American citizen under the Presidency of George Washington. Her diet (although it did incorporate New World ingredients such as turkey, potatoes, and corn) was full of the “culinary gestures” Ferguson refers to that continue the stable culinary code of British cuisine.

Amelia Simmons’ cookbook does reveal already emerging cases of hybridity, where British cuisine meets new ingredients and an expanding supply chain. One such amalgamation involves the incorporation of corn meal into the colonial diet, as seen in the dish Indian Pudding. This dish, which uses a traditional British style of sweetened and baked pudding using cereal grains, keeping the milk and molasses but using corn meal instead of rye, oats, or wheat. Her recipe begins with scalded milk, then adding cornmeal as well as raisins, eggs, molasses, or sugar and spices. By the 1700s, potatoes had already been brought from the New World to England (and all the British Isles) and were fully incorporated into British cuisine, so the inclusion in her American cookbook of a section on potatoes never discusses it as an exotic or new-fangled ingredient: “A Roast Potato is brought on with roast Beef, a Steak, a Chop or Fricasses; good boiled with a boiled dish; make an excellent stuffing for a turkey, water or water fowl; make a good pie and a good starch for many uses” (Simmons, 1796: 18). The food plants intrinsic to the Native American diet—corn, squash, potatoes—make their way into first, the colonial diet and then become part of the broader, emerging American cuisine, but, especially in the case of New England, they were always tethered to Old World culinary codes.

As the American nation emerges and solidifies during the nineteenth century, another element of the incomplete integration of the nationalist project and the culinary system emerges: the vastness of the potential supply chain and the rapid industrialization of food production, from farm to plate. New England remains a region
with many small, subsistence homesteads but there is a parallel emergence of new regions devoted to farming at a larger scale and new means—canals and railroads—of moving the goods from the West into the rural and increasingly expanding urban areas of the East. This leads to greater and more diverse access to a food supply now defined as much by a national impetus for devoting larger tracts of land towards the production of singular crops and animals—wheat, chicken, and cows for examples—to be sold to urban citizens: “By 1860, the growing demand of urban eaters had already prompted New England’s traditionally self-reliant farmers to reconfigure their lands with more cash crops to supply city tables with vegetables, fruits, butter, and poultry” (Vileisis, 2008: 38). And then there was the global trade of food stuffs and food laborers that began with the British and continued even after the end of monarchy and the beginning of democracy: fish, molasses, spices, slaves (Mintz, 1985). This meant that by the 1860s, many New Englanders (and throughout the East), had little to no first-hand experience with raising food themselves, and the vast bounty of the national and industrial supply chain meant they could either easily purchase the ingredients for Yankee (read British) meals or find ingredients that spoke to other cultural ethnic traditions: Irish, Italian, Polish.

Pat Willard, in her Introduction to America Eats: On the Road with the WPA (2008), a book that explores essays put together by writers hired by the American government under the New Deal to document regional American foodways, points out that, as is the case with Sidney Mintz, there are many who opine, who in fact lament, “our national cuisine and the poverty of its heritage” (Willard, 2008: 1). She argues that this is really self-regret on the part of the experts, for they wish that the “food we think of as truly American—think pies and barbecues, thick stews, a good roasted chicken, a tender slab of steak—did not develop over hundreds of years from the rustic charms of peasant fare or through the haughty demands of imperial refinements” (Willard, 2008: 1). She, too, wonders if the constant implicit compare and contrast with other national cuisines, the pressure to somehow meet the French standard or to measure in regard to Indian or Chinese imperial practices, has been a set up for failure. In a humorous vein, she asks, “The bad press that our national cuisine has received at times is partly due to timing. You can’t tell me every other country in the world has not had its share of bad kitchen days. But in comparison to others, ours is decidedly young cuisine” (Willard, 2008: 2). Willard embraces the haphazard mess that might just be our national cuisine: a mish-mash of culinary techniques, a mash up of agrarian and industrial, a constant hybrid of individual, regional, national, and global ingredients. It is fitting that Willard derives her analysis from her editorial work pulling together essays from the never published America Eats project, the only ever federally funded initiative by the United States government to document how America eats by collecting personal stories and reporting on festivals and other public events. This was part of a larger effort by the Roosevelt administration to assist out of work writers and artists hard hit by the great economic depression of the 1930s. The goal was never to create a cookbook but to help document “traditional cookery”; even almost a century ago, everyday home cooking was seen to be a fragile enterprise, due to the “mass production of foodstuff and partly cooked foods” (Willard, 2008: 4) into the everyday life of many Americans.
Farm to table in New England: A glimmer of the future?

So, the question remains: do we have a national cuisine? The answer remains: it depends on your standards and expectations and the analytic methods of containment. In light of the evidence from New England, both the systemic coherence and self-consciousness (as in Ray's definition) emerged from Europe, particularly the British culinary model. This indicates that the foodways were never a fundamental component of the American nationalist project, at least not in the early days of the founding of the nation through the Civil War. And, as the efforts of the WPA America Eats project indicate, emerging in the 1880s and defining by the 1930s, the increasing important of mass-produced foods with an increasingly national reach became the next system—industrial not national cuisine. So, to return to the earlier discussion about containing food practices into a certain conceptual frame, the definition of an American national cuisine is as follows: the spatial boundaries are created by regions, temporal continuity and change must always be involved, any coherence exists at the intersection of agrarian, domestic, and industrial practices, and, finally, it is not really central to the reproduction of national identity.

New England—as a region, as a set of shared culinary ideals and practices—might just confirm that definition. The cuisine of the region includes iconic foods and dishes understood to have a historical and cultural continuity—the Boston Baked Beans and Indian Pudding mentioned earlier but also Chicken Pie, Blueberry Cobbler, and the cornmeal and molasses-infused Anadama Bread—but there are also attempts to create a new culinary coherence. Simultaneously there are hybrid culinary styles emerging all the time as well as a continued reliance on industrial processed foods in both domestic and commercial settings. A haphazard mess, perhaps, but what if instead it was called consistently chaotic and innovative? Two examples can help make the case for this definition of a national cuisine: maple syrup and the farm to table movement.

Maple syrup is an iconic food ingredient that is unique to the northern forests of North America. The majority of maple syrup produced in the United States is done so in New England.

Maple sugaring long predates the establishment of strong national borders between the United States and Canada; fur trappers and traders were aware of and possibly trading syrup by the early 1700s. As early as 1672, a French Catholic missionary, during a journey on the northern side of Lake Huron in 1672 writes of a baptism where “maple water” was used. Historical evidence indicates that the Abenaki taught the colonists how to gauge the sugar maple tree with an axe and then use bark buckets to collect the sap; settlers called maple syrup “Indian molasses.” (Trubek, 2016) By 1749, other settlers were writing about harvesting sap and boiling it down to maple syrup in large ironware kettles. In northern New England and Southeastern Canada, most rural families owned lands with a “sugarbush” or a stand of sugar maple trees. For most early settlers in the region, maple syrup was the only available sweetener and more often than not the syrup was cooked down until it crystallized into maple sugar because it was easier to store (Trubek, 2016). Although the commercial production of cane sugar combined with government subsidies allowed for processed, refined sugar to become widely available and affordable to New Englanders during the twentieth century,
the process of sugaring and the regional identity with maple syrup did not decline or disappear. In fact, there are more taps and more maple syrup being produced in New England today than since the Second World War. In 2012, 378 million gallons of maple syrup were produced in New England (USDA, 2016). In February and March, all the New England states host Maple festivals, Maple weekends, open houses at individual sugar houses, and more.

These events tend to celebrate a culinary continuity: the long-term and persistent harvesting of this wild food by people in New England and the everyday consumption of this sweetener—on pancakes, in baked goods, stirred in coffee. But there are also many culinary transformations: up until the rise of processed refined cane sugar, the syrup was boiled down until it became crystallized and solid, used as a sugar. Without being able to easily compete with cane sugar, maple in the form of syrup was valorized and the traditions of boiling sap into syrup were connected to rural communities and identity in New England. In the twenty-first century, with rising concerns about the negative health implications of consuming both cane sugar and high fructose syrup, a new identity for maple syrup has formed: a healthy, natural sweetener (Trubek, 2016). New enterprises now create maple blocks and maple wafers or infused maple syrups (ginger, lime) for uses both savory and sweet. Maple syrup remains an iconic food of New England, but it does not always look or taste the same as the past. And a similar story of continuity and change can be told of many other iconic foods defining different geographic regions: Vidalia onions from Georgia, Hatch chilies from New Mexico, Montmorency cherries from Michigan.

The Farm to Table movement is another set of on the ground activities that function to reinforce and reproduce our regional, intersectional, and hybrid version of national cuisine. In many ways, this set of practices merges aspirations and actions; a counter-cuisine to the components of American cuisine characterized by a lack of spatial or temporal bounding and the relatively thin history of a peasant or subsistence based agrarian or culinary traditions has emerged. A counter-cuisine is an intervention into a dominant culinary paradigm, a movement and a moment when food becomes a vehicle for social change. The genesis began almost one hundred years ago as part of the back to the land movement, a sociopolitical protest against the increased industrialization and urbanization of American social and economic systems (Trubek, 2008). This movement, grounded in Thomas Jefferson's vision (he was one of America's First Founders and primary author of the Declaration of Independence) of an enlightened and empowered citizenry engaged in agrarian practices, was revitalized and expanded during the 1960s during the larger countercultural political upheavals of that era, which helped propel young people to migrate from cities and suburbs to rural areas and opt out of commercial consumer society; many small farms and restaurants were started at this time. In this iteration of the back to the land movement, young people moved to remote rural areas to lead lives more rooted in nature and less driven by the consumerism of contemporary life. In places like northern California, Wisconsin, Maine, and Vermont, many people became actively involved in producing food, often for subsistence but also starting entrepreneurial food businesses existing in parallel to the longer-term rural activities in these regions like tapping maple, running dairy farms, and hunting and foraging in the woods (Trubek, 2008). In New England,
this led to the development of a network of small farmers’ markets where people could come to purchase traditional, iconic foods like maple syrup, apples, potatoes, cabbages, and eggs, but also newer ingredients—goat and sheep’s milk cheese, infused honey, sourdough breads, kale, garlic—as well as dishes prepared from locally raised ingredients that went far beyond fried donuts made with apple cider and apple pie. The integration of a set of values and practices inspired by a rural, agrarian tradition that was no longer as wedded to British culinary codes led to a number of innovative New England restaurants producing a new regional cuisine. The dishes on these restaurant menus included maple syrup, butter, potatoes, poultry, venison, apples, and other typical and iconic foods of the region, but they are not wedded to any national or regional culinary code. At Fore Street, a well-known restaurant in Portland, Maine whose tag line is “Locally Sourced and Hand Crafted,” the menu includes this entrée, *Turnspit Roasted Organic Maine Half Chicken From Whitefield Maine. Charred cornbread rusk with toasted black cumin sweet butter.*

Fidelity to place without any hegemonic culinary system to abide by, aspirations to continue to intervene in an overly industrial systems of food production and attempts to continue making regional dishes define this movement (another one on the fore Street menu is *Dry Rubbed Pork Loin with Morse's sauerkraut with pickling spice.* Famer’s markets, artisan producers of cheese, beer, bread, and many other non-industrial foods, and farm to table restaurants are now found throughout the United States. These efforts do not define our national cuisine, but they certainly work within the proffered definition.

**Conclusion**

In Willard’s *America Eats*, she quotes a supervisor sending out a memo to all the state offices of the Works Progress Administration program (1935–42) working on the only federal project ever designed to promote American national cuisine. He says:

> If the book has a basic purpose, it is to make people appreciate a much-neglected aspect of our culture, the American table, as much as a few expatriates do the French. If we can make Americans realize that they have the best table in the world, we shall have helped to deepen national patriotism (2008: 5).

This project was abandoned on the eve of the Second World War, and although the nation entered a long period of patriotic fervor and social, economic and political efforts based in nationalist projects, food never became central to nationalism or centralized in a coherent national cuisine. But there is plenty of evidence for some coherence that is uniquely American, a story we can tell about the past and the present, our own unique mish-mash, mash-up, and inventive means of getting food on the table, each and every day.