



An historical perspective on variety in United States dining based on menus



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 December 2016

Received in revised form

24 March 2017

Accepted 23 April 2017

Available online 26 April 2017

Keywords:

Variety

Overeating

Overconsumption

Restaurants

Menus

Neophobia

ABSTRACT

While food variety continues to be of major interest to those studying eating and health, research has been mainly limited to laboratory research of simple meals. This paper seeks to enlarge the scope of eating research by examining the food offered in the earliest menus in United States restaurants and hotels of the early and mid-19th c, when restaurants began. This reveals a very large variety in what food was offered. The paper discusses why variety has declined in the US and probably elsewhere, including changes in the customer, changes in food service, changes of food availability, and the industrialization of the food supply. Menu analysis offers another approach to studying dietary variety across cultures and across time.

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1. Introduction

Variety continues to be of major interest in the study of eating habits and health related to diet (Johnson & Wardle, 2014; Martin, 2016). In many studies, variety has been linked to greater consumption. These studies are often studies of laboratory eating or studies using photos of foods, rather than real meals (Haugaard, Brockhoff, & Lähteenmäki, 2016). Recent work has demonstrated the complexity of the concept of variety – how it is measured, and how it is understood by consumers. For example, Haugaard et al. (2016) found no association between subjective variety and the number of meal components or the visual cues, even though variety is often defined by the number of sensory differences. Variety is made more interesting by the fact that there are large cross-cultural differences in desired variety, with the U.S. and the U.K. displaying a desire for greater variety, including in fine dining menu choices (Rozin, Fischler, Shields, & Masson, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to add some historical perspective to the current discussion on variety. The historical material includes restaurant and hotel menus from the very beginning of restaurants as we know them today, in the 1820s in the United States.

The study of menus is interesting because eating in these early

dining locations was very different from eating out of the home today. Today, many meals in the West are one course (for example in the UK: Yates & Warde, 2015). This one course pattern probably holds for most fast food. Meals include more courses, say 2–3 courses in France and Italy (Grignon & Grignon, 2009; Monteleone & Dinnella, 2009). Alliot et al. (2012) has applied controlled testing of meals, but using a buffet model for a three course French meal. The meals in the first U.S. restaurants had many more courses (see below), and more choices for each course. This is very different from eating today. Current views on food variety with very simple meals with one course of multiple items has led to the view that meal variety is pre-planned, and perhaps food intake is pre-planned as well (Keenan, Brunstrom, & Ferriday, 2015).

2. Background on dining in the 19th century

Early restaurants and hotel dining rooms provide a glimpse into elite food in the 19th century. Before the middle of the 19th century, most dining in the US was in private homes. For those away from home who needed a meal, there were inns and some taverns that provided room for travelers. The first restaurants were in Paris, France (Spang, 2000) and the reason they are of interest to the student of modern eating is that they were the first eating locations where customers made choices of when to eat, what to eat, and with whom to eat (Freedman, 2011b).

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In the United States, a parallel development was taking place, with some restaurants (in the French style), followed by broader restaurants and dining rooms in hotels. In both France and the US, these early developments in dining focused on cities; there were few dining options outside of cities, aside from the usual inns and taverns. Local people did not eat in taverns; they mainly drank. In fact, in the UK, taverns only served alcohol; in the US taverns served food, mainly to travelers (Erby, 2016). Hotels usually served meals at set times, mainly to hotel guests. The U.S. cities where dining became established in the early and mid-19th c were New York, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and New Orleans. A lot has been written about New York as the population, wealth, and food capital of America (for example, see Lobel, 2014) – for that reason, I will use some data/information from New York, but will also tap into resources from other cities, especially Boston, which is lately receiving more attention to its dining history (Erby, 2016; Freedman, 2011a; O'Connell, 2017).

Boston experimented quite early with restaurants, beginning with Julien's Restorator which opened in Boston in 1793, not long after the first restaurants in Paris. Julien's Restorator was operated by a French immigrant named Jean Payplat, and served the soups and other restorative foods found in French restaurants. Julien's closed in 1815. According to [Restaurant-ing through history.com](#) (2010) and O'Connell (2017), other restorators opened in Boston in the 1790s, and were the beginning of restaurants in Boston and elsewhere on the east coast of the United States.

The 1820s saw the first American restaurants that contrasted with the French model. There are questions as to the exact dates of opening (with the same name), but the list looks approximately like this, keeping mind that we have included only free standing restaurants and excluded inns and taverns:

Union Oyster House, Boston, opened in 1826.

Delmonico's, New York, opened in 1827 – menu in French.

Durgin Park, Boston, opened in 1827.

The above short list can be augmented with establishments that did not open as restaurants, but later became restaurants.

Antoine's, New Orleans, opened in 1840 – opened as a pension or boarding house.

Tadich Grill, San Francisco, 1849 – opened as a coffee stand.

Old Ebbit Grill, Washington – opened as a boarding house (1856), and then a tavern.

At around the same time, hotels began to offer fine dining to both travelers and to locals in their dining rooms. In fact, as Freedman (2011a) points out, most fine dining took place in hotels in the mid 19th c, and fine dining restaurants remained relatively rare. The first luxury Boston hotel with fine dining was the *Exchange Coffee House* (1808–1818, 1822–1854) which served set meals at set times at communal tables. The next luxury hotel to open, and the hotel claimed to be the finest hotel in the US, was *The Tremont House* (1829–1895). This hotel set the new standard with the first indoor plumbing in the US, indoor toilets, and the first room keys in the US. The hotel had set mealtimes, like those at the *Exchange Coffee House Hotel*: breakfast 7:30, dinner 2:30 or 3:00pm, tea 6pm, supper 9pm. The *Tremont House* used the new dining a la russe (by the 1840's, according to O'Connell, 2017).

Dining a la russe involves courses being brought to the table sequentially, and differs from service à la française in which all the food is brought out at once. The russe style of service required a great deal of labor; there was one waiter for 3–4 people. Everyone sat at one large communal U-shaped table; in fact, one long table was common until after the Civil War in the 1860s. Parts of the menu were listed in French. The design of the *Tremont House* was supposedly used as the basis for the design of the *Astor House* in NY. These two luxury hotels were followed by *The Tremont Restaurant*, Boston, 1832, opened by Harvey Parker, featuring dining at any

time; he later opened *The Parker House and Restaurant* (1855/56–1925, 1927–) – the first in the US to use the American plan, in which food and lodging were separately billed. The Parker House used smaller tables, not one communal table. The Parker House is the longest continually operating hotel in the US. In mid-19th c Boston two more luxury hotels joined the dining scene, *The Adams House*, Boston (1846–1929) with British-American food, rather than French; and *The Revere House*, Boston (1847–1912) with a menu in English. The Tremont, Revere and Parker all contained a separate ladies dining room, with lighter food menus and no alcohol, rather than the emphasis on meat (Erby, 2016, p. 69; O'Connell, 2017, p. 21). On a more general level, US luxury hotels were open to all white males, regardless of class.

Luxury hotels with fine dining also opened in New York City. These included the first New York luxury hotel, the *Astor House Hotel* (1836–1913), and *The Fifth Avenue Hotel* (1859–1908), which served breakfast 6–11. Lunch 1–2, a la carte dinner 2–5pm, table d'hôte (set meal) 5:30pm, tea 6–9pm, supper 9–12pm. The menu was mainly in English, with some French flourishes.

Fine dining in the U.S. was marked by the speed of eating – Kasson (1990) notes that eating fast was the norm, and dining was supposed to take 60–120 minutes even for a formal dinner. O'Connell (2017) also notes the fast pace of eating, citing eating times of under 1 h. The reader should keep in mind that these meals had 6, 8 even 10 courses. Eating fast was definitely the norm in mid-day establishments catering to the working class and some middle class office workers who took their mid-day meal in eating houses, characterized by eating a lot of food quickly and cheaply. Eating houses declined in the late 19th c as sandwich lunches became more popular.

3. Variety in early dining

The above background on dining outside the home in the early and mid 19th c provides a background for the discussion of variety. It is perhaps easier to study the dining scene in the early and mid 19th c in the US because dining options were very limited. Few places provided a dining experience outside homes, other than taverns and eating houses aimed at the working class. The dinner menus from the hotels listed above showcase the enormous variety of food offered at each meal. The menus of that period were produced daily and dated. The typical menu at the Tremont House in Boston usually offered the following according to Erby (2016):

Soup.

Fish (7–10 choices).

Entrees (at least 15 side dishes).

Roast meats and game.

Dessert.

Fruits, coffee, liquors.

O'Connell (2017) states that diners could choose one dish from each course or sample several dishes. Before the middle of the 19th c there were mixed feelings about French food; the standard might have been England. But after 1850, upper class diners identified French cuisine as the standard for fine dining, and this did not change until the influence of the growing middle class changed this by the late 19th c ([restauranting through history.com](#), 2016; Haley, 2011).

What food variety was offered in these early restaurants and hotel dining rooms? Freedman (2011b) notes "... I surveyed hundreds of menus from Boston restaurants in the mid-19th century. What they revealed is that ... the menus are far more diverse than those of most restaurants today. When Bostonians went out to dinner, they expected — and got — a range of dishes that would seem overwhelming to modern diners." Freedman (2011a) describes the Revere House menus, based on the collection of 706

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