



THE IMMIGRATION OF FLAVOR

Ha Roda's mother once fed multiple generations of her family by using nothing more than a solitary pan on a three-legged, rice husk stove known as a lo' trau. The women in her family learned to cook perching next to her in a small, modest kitchen without ventilation or countertops.



*Ha Roda's cousins cooking over a lo' trau.
Photography provided by Ha Roda*

Roda's earliest memories were made around the table -- big family feasts where a whole pig roasted in a pink bath of xa xiu barbecue paste, soup steeped in delicate bowls and greedy hands clamored for the last steamed bun.

"We all lived together back then," she says. "It was a revolving door of family and neighbors. It was home."

You Can't Go Home Again

That was before her family fled Communist-controlled North Vietnam -- before their house was confiscated, before they lost their citizenship, before there was nothing to return to.

Her grandparents were the first to leave in 1975, when borders were still open and exits still possible; but Roda's father couldn't wrap his mind around leaving with seven children and only a one-hour warning.

"I remember my grandfather frantically driving around Saigon on his scooter, trying to round up his family," Roda says. "My dad declined, believing things would get better."

By 1978, they had gotten worse. Now known as Ho-Chi Minh City, the former Saigon was riddled with secrecy and distrust. Children were indoctrinated into the new Vietnam by the Communist Youth Union -- taught to value country above all else and praised for reporting family and friends who veered from the ideals of the new Communist state. There were food rations instilled and propaganda, the creation of a list of forbidden words associated with the old regime and the establishment of re-education camps for those whose loyalties were questioned.



*Ha Roda
Photography: Betsy Hansen*

"Even though it was bad, we were afraid to leave," Roda says. "There were stories of pirates at sea, some just misinformation, others mostly true."

In fact, of the one million Vietnamese who escaped in those years, only half made it to their intended destination; the rest died, were stranded or deported from other countries. Roda's family was one of the lucky ones.

"We left on a small fishing boat the year I was 10," she says. "Lined up like sardines, we sat inside the port holes of the ship. After three days and three nights at sea we had run out of food and water when we came across an American oil rig that gave us supplies and pointed us toward the nearest land."

When the boat ran aground in Malaysia, the hull was damaged and the ship began to take on water.

"The police ordered us to turn around and head back out," Roda recalls. "With so many immigrants



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fleeing Vietnam, most countries were denying access. With the boat filling fast, the captain took a chance and ignored the warning. It was either be killed by the authorities or die at sea."

Once on shore, the refugees were taken to a deserted, government-owned island where they awaited extradition. Coded letters sent to her grandparents before they left Vietnam told of their plans but there was no way of knowing if the letters ever arrived and if their sponsorship was secured.

After six months of waiting, the family finally boarded a plane bound for Illinois.

"We arrived with only the clothes on our backs," Roda says. "It was December and I had never seen snow. I remember my brother was wearing shorts and my aunt and uncle brought us donated coats to wear."

Those first years in the states were hard. Unable to speak the language, well-paying jobs were not available and the family of nine lived off \$30,000 per year. In addition, there were few of the familiar comforts of home in their new country.

"Back then, it was hard to even make Vietnamese food because the ingredients were hard to come by," Roda says. "I remember you couldn't buy fish sauce, so we made due with soy sauce."

Nothing looked the same, no one sounded the same and the food didn't taste like home.

Finding The Taste of Home

Today, Roda lives a typical American life in the suburbs with her two children and her "white man" husband.

"When my kids were little all they ate was pizza and mac and cheese," she says. "I got into cooking because I wanted them to know where I came from, to know there was something else out there that makes them who they are."

That's when she began recreating the dishes of her childhood, at first for her family and then for those interested in learning the nuances of Vietnamese cooking. What began as a catering business slowly morphed into cooking demonstrations for would-be chefs. Her popular Pho' Queen Cooking demonstrations recently led to her first cookbook: A Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Family Recipes.



*Ha at one of her cooking demonstrations
Photography: Betsy Hansen*

Nowadays, when Roda hosts her demonstrations, posts recipes on her website (phoqueencooking.com) and even when she cooks for her family, it's often the dishes she remembers from her own childhood: spring rolls and stir-fries, rice dishes and pho'. As she cooks, she shares the stories of that three-day voyage and the long trip to her American Dream.



*Ha's daughter helps roll dough
Photography: Betsy Hansen*

"It's a comfort to me to know that I am passing on my heritage," she says, "so later when my kids smell garlic roasting in a pan or basil plucked from the garden it will trigger a fond memory of their mom."

That's what food does for us. It transports us back in time, connects us to our past and tells the story of who we are - just like the story that began in a lo' trau kitchen.

Like Roda, we all have comfort foods and flavors that hint at our own culinary genealogy, recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation. From what part of the world do your tastes originate? What stories can we learn from the food that is set on your table? As Americans, our culinary traditions reach back across time and oceans -- branching out in all directions to create the history that has become our very own melting pot.

The History of the American Plate

Food has always been about more than sustenance. On every plate we find cultural, emotional and even religious significance. What we eat has served as a class marker, distinguishing poverty from plenty, and even as a symbol of national identity -- like the saying goes "as American as apple pie."

Until the late 19th century, the history of the American diet was largely rooted in our ties with Great Britain -- plain cooking steeped in religious piety and Protestant tradition. One of the first dietary shifts came with the arrival of Germans and their preference for marinated meats, wurst and sauerkraut, which eventually became the basis for American barbecue, hot dogs and cole slaw.

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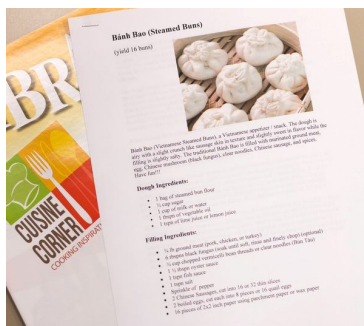
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With the great World Wars, American cuisine was changed forever. As throngs of immigrants disembarked on our shores, they unpacked new flavors, recipes and cooking styles. Servicemen returned home with an affinity for Eastern fare and the post-war economic boom introduced the rise of on-the-go eating and convenience food. For the next few decades, a surge in immigration would introduce the flavors of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as the spread of Mexican-American cuisine.



Photography: Betsy Hansen

To understand the evolution of food in our country we have to ask the questions: Why do we choose to eat what we eat? And how do we define what is the typical American meal? It's this type of pondering that leads us to ask just how we went from iceberg lettuce to microgreens and from Wonder Bread to quinoa. As the world's melting pot, just what all has been added to this recipe we call the American dining experience?

Taking it Slow

With the challenge to "go west young man" Americans began to spread out across the country, leaving their multi-generational family homes and immigrant enclaves. By the 1950s, the proliferation of the automobile, new-home construction and a 41,000-mile interstate highway program meant people were migrating from city neighborhoods to the periphery of the suburbs. This shift away from concentrated, urban living brought a change in the way we shop for and consume food.

Imagine a small, European city -- close enough to walk to work and to pop in the local market on the way home. Now imagine that community spread out over miles. What was once a daily habit of shopping for fresh ingredients at the corner produce stand has now become a weekly trip to the big-box store. It's this shift that has led Americans to question how our food is sourced, how it is transported and where it comes from. Questions that chefs consider as they attempt to balance cost with quality, and freshness with convenience.

What price have we paid for having our food 'fast'? And what can we gain from learning to take it slow? A group of internationally-born chefs weigh in on the state of food in the nation, and what we can learn from the many culinary cultures who now call America home.

In-Season or Out of Luck

Elisa Scarpa, owner of the Italian gastronomia *Fatto in Casa*, is known for her pear torte. Buried beneath a dusting of sugary snow are more than a pound of Bartlett pears. It's a house specialty and a favorite of clients to the eatery located in the trendy East End Market.



Photography: Betsy Hansen

"I begin making my tortes in early fall when the pears are in season," Scarpa says. "But come December, the pears are gone and so are the tortes. It's the kind of eating that I grew up with, where ingredients are at their peak and the limited availability of a dish makes it truly special."



Elisa Scarpa, owner of the Italian gastronomia *Fatto in Casa*
Photography: Betsy Hansen

Scarpa was raised in a small town outside of Turin, Italy, where, according to her, "things rarely changed. Cows walked through the center of town every evening on their way from the fields to the stables and our family owned one of the few cars."

At 46, she has never been to a drive-thru restaurant and she still struggles to understand our nation's obsession with convenience and constant availability.

"If I wanted a tomato I didn't go to the grocery, I picked one off the vine," she says. "If it wasn't the season for tomatoes, I just didn't have one."

That kind of eating may seem natural to people from small, rural towns but does it work in today's hectic, city-centric world?

"I guess it's the evolution of society," she admits, "but having too much, too fast makes it impossible to maintain quality. I believe every ingredient matters. You don't eat it out of a box as you rush out the door, you choose special things and appreciate them. You sit and enjoy and taste every bite."



*l-r: Alex Meyers, Elisa Scarpa and Alicia Perez
Photography: Betsy Hansen*

Among the many convincing reasons to choose food at its proper time are cost, taste and the variety that comes from a rotating-supply of crops. To find out what's harvested seasonally in Central Florida go to www.localharvest.org where you can find listings of farmers' markets and seasonal produce.



*Theo Hollerbach, owner of
Hollerbach's Willow Tree Cafe
Photography: Betsy Hansen*

Fresh Fare Farmed Locally

Monday was slaughter day at the small butcher shop in Kilburg, Germany. Six hogs and one cow arrived every week from nearby farms to the Hollerbach family store -- delivered from farms so close the Hollerbachs knew the individual farmers and even what the animals ate.

"We paid directly," Theo Hollerbach says. "There were no transportation costs. We were farm-to-table before it was a trend and you could tell the difference."

Sunday was the family meal, a feast made from the cuts left over at the shop.

"We ate whatever the patrons didn't," Hollerbach says. "What I can do with bologna is amazing."



When Hollerbach, owner of Hollerbach's Willow Tree Cafe, came to the United States he missed the simple, hearty fare of his childhood. On vacations, he would often seek out the familiarity of German restaurants.

"Often times, they got the general idea but they didn't really get it," he says. "It wasn't just the freshness of the food. There was also a different taste profile."

When food is harvested too soon and then shipped long distances, it's not going to have as many nutrients as food grown locally. Add to that the irradiation and preservatives used to protect produce during transportation and you sacrifice quality, flavor and texture.

Photography: Betsy Hansen



Hollerbach also discovered that the American palate was different than his own -- favoring sweeter, saltier foods than he was accustomed to.

"I missed the basic, home-cooked comfort food I grew up with," he says, "things like sausages, crusty bread and schnitzel fried just right."

Today, Hollerbach is trying to recreate the food, the flavors and even the atmosphere of home.

*Photography:
Betsy Hansen*

"At our restaurant, we call it 'gemuetlichkeit,'" he says. "It's the sense of well-being and

happiness that comes from enjoying the company of friends and family while savoring good food and drink."



Photography: Betsy Hansen

Despite Hollerbach's belief in freshness, he admits the type of butchery he grew up with is problematic in today's world. While economic and environmental concerns make small-space slaughter prohibitive, there is a return to pasture-based farming and neighborhood butcher shops that feature grass-fed beef, pastured pork and organic poultry. When purchasing high-quality

meat, consumers should look for local shops that avoid selling meat raised with antibiotics, herbicides, growth-hormones and animal by-products.



*Hari Pulapaka, executive chef
of Cress*

Photography: Jenneffer Pulapaka

Simplify and Elevate

If Hari Pulapaka, executive chef of Cress and three-time James Beard semi-finalist, could eat just one meal for the rest of his life it would be yogurt. Far from the sweet, fruity flavors found in your dairy case, this traditional South Indian dish is made with rice, yogurt and pickles.

"It's a very simple dish that has been passed down for generations," he says. "Typically the last course, it is eaten for therapeutic reasons."

With a much-talked-about restaurant and two-time nod from Food & Wine Magazine as Top 100 People's Best New Chef, you'd expect this chef and associate professor of mathematics to prefer something more refined.



Photography: Jenneffer Pulapaka

"What chefs eat at home is not what they serve in their restaurants," he says. "We eat comfort foods, two- or three-ingredient dishes made simply."

His preference for basic, Indian cuisine comes from meals he enjoyed as a child: vegetables and lentils, Dahl-based (or lentil-based) dishes and rice.



Photography: Jenneffer Pulapaka

"Our meals were simple and modest," Pulapaka says. "They made me feel good physically and nourished and I enjoyed the banter of our communal table."

Despite the relatively few ingredients, the flavors were intense.

"I was a vegetarian but when I came to America I found the flavors of vegetables were under-seasoned and bland," he says. "In my restaurant, I won't be accused of bland food."

Pulapaka sees himself and Cress as "adding more to what is already good here in Central Florida." He hopes to show diners the joy in eating slowly, paying attention to fresh ingredients and experimenting with flavors they may not be used to. And while it may not be on the menu, Pulapaka himself still enjoys the simple pleasure of a bowl of homemade yogurt, rice and sometimes a little pickle.

Food for Thought

So, if you look in the shopping cart of the average American family, just what are we eating? The truth is, there's no right answer. You might find instant coffee in one cart and hand-roasted Kenyan beans in another, pre-packed burgers in this person's buggy and skinless, organic chicken in the next. Then you add to the mix nationality, regionalism and lifestyle and it's anyone's guess what will end up on tonight's table. The fact of the matter is this: being American is a complex thing that is constantly being redefined. We have Boston Brahmins who enjoy sushi and Southerners who love their barbecue Korean-style. Mexican-Americans who eat egg rolls and Cubans who prefer New England clam chowda'. And, as more and more people arrive, the definition only broadens.

So despite the stereotypes of fried food and corn dogs, it seems American cuisine is as diverse as our population. While some of us enjoy schnitzel there are others who are content with a simple bowl of yogurt or a homemade spring roll.



Photography: Jenneffer Pulapaka

"We live across borders," Hollerbach says. "We eat curry one night and tacos the next and so many other things to which I was never exposed."

And somewhere beneath the clash of cultures and the homogeny of our big-box world there is a trace of the past -- a comfort food scribbled on a dog-eared recipe card or a simple spice that hints at who we are

and where we came from. Maybe our history can be found in a dish descended from butchers or tent-cooks, or, perhaps, one that first came to life on a small rice husk stove in a place we once called home.



Heaven and Earth

One of Theo Hollerbach's favorite comfort foods is a dish he calls "Heaven and Earth." A simple, peasant meal, this recipe features the hearty comfort of potatoes married with the sweet, heavenly taste of apple.

Ingredients:

1 apple, peeled and sliced thin
Brown sugar
3 oz. bacon, diced
3 oz. onion, chopped
1 lb. potatoes, cooked

Photography provided by Hollerbach's Willow Tree Cafe

Cook the apple slices in water with brown sugar to taste. Simmer until soft. Set aside. Sauté the bacon and onion together. Add the apples, bacon and onions to the cooked potatoes and mash until combined.

Resetting the Table

One day as Vivika Aversteat sat watching an episode on The Food Network about food trucks her business was born. A life-long cook, this Swedish chef from Stockholm discovered a new approach to cooking that was different from the brick-and-mortar restaurants she was familiar with.

"I thought food trucks were a neat concept," she says. "They offered a smaller, up-front investment, less staff and the chance to work part-time."



Vivika Aversteat

Photography: Betsy Hansen

She also warmed to the idea because this would not be her first time cooking from inside a truck. Years ago, this former European fuel racecar driver often catered for VIP guests and her own pit crew from the kitchen of her trailer.

As "Sweden's drag queen," Aversteat practically lived at the track. From her small roving kitchen, she cooked "proper dinners" for her crew of eight and her husband, the crew chief.

"When it came time to purchase our food truck, we decided we could build a better one," she says.

Pulling from her former life at the track and her time as a kitchen designer for IKEA, Aversteat and her husband designed a truck that was larger and more efficient than the others in the lot.

"To start with, we chose to build ours wider than the typical refurbished delivery trucks most people use," she says. "Then we designed the kitchen to have a triangle flow pattern and a deep, three-bowl sink that could fit all of our pots and pans. I wanted the truck to be sensible, streamlined and free of clutter."

The clutter-free approach is one very common to Swedish cooks.

"For example, I don't have 50 plates in my kitchen because I don't use that many," Aversteat says. "I designed my kitchen to accommodate each specific piece of equipment I have. Garage sales would never work in Sweden, because we just don't hold on to clutter."

In the early days, Swedish meatballs were the biggest seller in her food truck business she playfully named SwedeDISH.

"That was what Americans were familiar with," Aversteat says. "I finally started telling people to try a menu item we called the Thor. I told the customers if they didn't like it, I'd give them their money back."

This traditional dish, known in Sweden as tunnbrödulle, is made with all-beef hot dogs, mashed potatoes, grilled Swedish bread, crispy onions and housemade crab



SwedeDISH's best-selling dish, the Thor
Photography: Betsy Hansen

salad. Today, it is one of Averstear's best sellers and, to date, she has yet to have to give a refund.

"I just had to educate people on what type of food I made," she says. "It took me months but I knew once they tried it, they'd be satisfied."

The one American staple she just couldn't escape was the burger.

"My husband joked that if I started serving burgers my mother would kill me," she says, "but it seemed like everyone was requesting them."

Not wanting to compromise her Swedish roots, but still give her customers what they requested, Averstear remembered a small bar in Stockholm that served a burger done Swedish-style.

"What I introduced to our menu was a premium burger with the spices mixed into the patty," she says. "Then I topped it with fresh blue crab meat, arugula salad, fried onions and a secret sauce on a toasted bun."

It works because of the quality of the beef she uses.

"I don't cut corners," Averstear says. "I use quality ingredients. My margins aren't as good as others but if I wouldn't eat it, I won't serve it."

Today, the SwedeDISH food truck is one of six to be featured on the Cooking Channel's Eat Street. The program showcases the vendors -- "food mavericks with creative takes on mobile meals and inspiring stories to tell" -- and seeks out the best curbside eats in North America. After catching the show, Central Floridians can simply log on to Twitter ([Twitter.com/SwedeDishTruck](https://twitter.com/SwedeDishTruck)) or Facebook ([Facebook.com/SwedeDISHFoodTruck](https://facebook.com/SwedeDISHFoodTruck)) to find out where SwedeDISH will be visiting next. While the rest of the nation is still drooling over the Thor, we can simply stroll down the street for a taste of what Averstear guarantees is a good thing.



Christine Van Dyk is a freelance writer specializing in travel, education and lifestyle copy. She is the mother of three teens and lives in Maitland with her husband, Jon.

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POLL OF THE MONTH

Of the many chefs and restaurants profiled in our latest issue, who do you plan to visit for the first time?

- Cress
- Hollerbach's Willow Tree Cafe
- Fatto in Casa
- PhoQueenCooking.com
- SwedeDISH
- All of the above

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