



Regional Cuisine Reflects National Diversity



A young girl enjoys corn on the cob while at the Minnesota State Fair with her family. State fairs showcase a variety of regional fare, from corn on the cob to corn dogs.
© AP Photo/The Star Tribune, Renee Jones Schneider

The United States is a nation of immigrants; only Native Americans can claim North America as their ancestral home. Other Americans or their ancestors came to this land, creating what many call “the melting pot.” These immigrants brought with them the traditions of their homeland – including their agricultural practices, food preferences and cooking methods.

America’s ethnic melting pot has given rise to a cuisine equally varied and diverse. Most of the foods categorized as American are traditional dishes from other lands that have gained popularity across the country.

While there may be no perfect definition of traditional American cooking, dishes such as clam chowder, chili, gumbo, fried chicken, crab cakes, lobster rolls, Buffalo wings, corn on the cob, potato salad, hamburgers, hot dogs and apple pie would be on most lists.

Cuisine in different parts of the United States developed independently. Each region was influenced by the nationality of colonists that settled in the area and by the ingredients locally available. As a result, each region has distinct ingredients, flavors and dishes of its own.

New England

New England, the northeastern part of the country, is renowned for hearty dishes brought to its shores by British colonists and for its cold-water seafood, harvested locally. This is the land of Yankee pot roast, Boston baked beans, New England clam chowder and Maine lobster.

The South

Southeastern states are home to “down-home Southern cooking,” characterized by farm-style cuisine with plenty of fried foods, heavy sauces and sweet desserts. Deep-fried chicken, known as

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Southern fried chicken, and chicken-fried steak, a deep-fried beef cutlet, are often served with a thick white sauce called home-style gravy.

Southerners also love barbecue, but unlike residents of the Southwest, they prefer mustard- or vinegar-based barbecue sauces. Southern barbecue usually means pork, especially pork ribs, well spiced or marinated and slowly cooked over glowing coals. Collard greens, black-eyed peas and cornbread are common side dishes. Pecan pie, peach cobbler, banana pudding and sweet potato pie are some favorite desserts.

New Orleans

Although located in the Southern state of Louisiana, New Orleans has a distinct culture and cuisine of its own. This city at the mouth of the Mississippi River was settled by Spanish and French colonists who brought slaves from Africa and the Caribbean to the region. Consequently, the city's Creole and Cajun cuisine is a mixture of Spanish and French cooking, spiced with African and West Indian flavors.

Blackened fish and steaks are grilled with coatings of pepper and hot spices. Jambalaya and gumbo are flavored stews of meats, sausage and seafood. Many Cajun dishes are highly spiced with hot pepper and chili, but not all are fiery. Traditional Spanish and



Although the South is known for its Southern fried chicken, the deep-fried dish is a staple of U.S. cuisine. © AP Photo/Kathy Willens

French cooking, along with local variations, are available in many restaurants throughout the city.

The Southwest

Cuisine in the Southwestern states has been influenced by Native Americans, early Spanish settlers and Mexicans. Southwestern cuisine includes a variety of dishes prepared with local ingredients and liberally sprinkled with Mexican spices.

Tex-Mex cuisine is a variant of Southwestern cooking that is most popular in Texas and along the Mexican border. Popular Tex-Mex dishes include barbecue and chili. These cowboy-inspired dishes are so popular in the Southwest and across the United States that many places have annual chili festivals and barbecue cook-offs with prizes for the best recipes. It is also home to salsa, nachos, tacos and burritos.

California

California is blessed with a bountiful supply of fresh fruits, vegetables and seafood in all seasons. Its ethnically diverse population has developed a healthy cuisine that makes use of fresh ingredients flavored with unusual combinations of spices. Green salads topped with avocados and citrus fruits might be served with Asian spiced peanut sauce. Fish may be lightly grilled and served with Chinese vegetables and Native American fry bread. Almost any combination of ethnic food styles can be combined in California cooking.

U.S. Department of Agriculture employees participate in the department's annual chili challenge contest. Cooking competitions are popular throughout the United States. © USDA

