

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY CUISINE

As previously stated, contemporary cuisine is a broad topic. I am approaching this topic from the position of a culinary arts educator with thirty-five years experience in the field and a keen interest in how I am prepared as both a practitioner and a teacher of the subject. Therefore, I am injecting my own personal viewpoints and bias. I am not looking at the subject from the standpoint of where the average of the American diet is headed. I am pursuing the topic with an interest in the direction of the upper echelon of American chefs—those whose passion is in the integrity of the cuisine and how it is crafted.

Contemporary cuisine has been given many titles. Here are some of the names that contemporary cuisine might also go under: New American Cuisine, Modern Cuisine, Nouvelle Cuisine, American Cuisine, California Cuisine, Fusion Cuisine, Eclectic Cuisine, Conscious Cuisine, and Intuitional Cooking. All of these names are appropriate in some way or another. In the end, the proof is in the pudding. How it is named is irrelevant in comparison with how it is executed.

Historical Perspective

The origins of contemporary cuisine are rooted in the past. Chefs declare over and over that there is nothing new, only interpretations of what has gone before. It is amazing how rooted in history is cuisine. When one makes a cream sauce it is with essentially the same methodology as was initiated during the Middle Ages in Europe. Grilling over an open fire is at least 300,000 years old. Most of the acts that we perform in professional kitchens have been repeated by millions of others before us. I feel that this is one of the most special aspects of cooking—that connection with humanity through the ages. As strong as this connection is there are refinements and even, on rare occasions, new directions. The important point to make here is how solidly any cuisine is rooted in the past.

Contemporary cuisine is firmly based in the cuisine of France. French cuisine has ruled the professional cooking world for several hundred years. The reason is simple. The French were perhaps the only culture on the planet that codified their cuisine. The structure and organization allowed for repetition and imitation. Another reason is that the French were one of only a handful that established two separate levels of cuisine—cuisine bourgeois and haute cuisine. Every country has some type of national representative cuisine. Very few have established a higher level of cuisine different from the common cuisine of the country as a whole. This aristocratic approach became desirous for other countries, most of which only had their own common cuisine, to adopt French cuisine as a sign of richness or wealth. The final reason is that French cuisine is just flat out damned good.

Even the transition from traditional to contemporary cuisine may be best exemplified by the French chefs. The most famous modern day revolution in cuisine occurred with the development of Nouvelle Cuisine. This began in the 1950's in the Lyons area through the genius of chef Ferdinand Point at his restaurant, Le Pyramid. He inspired a whole generation of young French chefs (Bocuse, Troisgros, Verge, Chapel, et al) to break with tradition and develop a whole new approach to cooking in the 1960's. Some of the characteristics were lighter sauces, less reliance on heavy meat dishes, quicker cooking times, the use of more vegetables and fruits, and wild creativity in combining foods and plate presentations. This movement then influenced the next generation of young American chefs who in the 1970's created California Cuisine. Some, including myself, might argue that California Cuisine **is** contemporary cuisine.

It isn't as if the historical cuisines of other cultures don't matter. World cuisines in general, Asian specifically, are very important to contemporary cuisine. American culture is described as a melting pot. That term signifies a constantly changing formula.

The face of America has become more Hispanic and Asian over the past thirty years. This trend is strongly reflected in contemporary cuisine. It used to be that the recommendation for young chefs was to base their cooking in the foundations of French cuisine before branching out. Respected chefs like Rick Bayless of Frontera Grill in Chicago, believe that young chefs today should base their cooking in the cuisine that is their driving passion, like Mexican is for him. It goes without saying that if world cuisines matter in the characteristics of contemporary cuisine (they do) then one would have to look at the oldest two known cuisines on the planet, Chinese and Indian, for source and inspiration. The fact is that international and ethnic cuisines are important characteristics of contemporary cuisine, so it is imperative to seek inspiration beyond the Eiffel Tower.

It is important that we have a reverence and respect for the past. With cuisine you have to deal with something deeply imbedded in people's experience—their food. It is key to respect what has come before as to avoid failure in the present. The past becomes our base of operations, often our source of inspiration. It is also important to not be locked in that past in a stale, repetitive, and cumbersome way. As chef Andrew Dornenburg has stated, "The better you understand the rules, the more effective you can be when you chose to disregard them."

Contemporary cuisine couldn't exist if we only produced food in the way that it had been done before.

Comfort Foods

One of the building blocks of contemporary cuisine is the familiar food of our past. These foods are affectionately referred to as "comfort" foods. These are foods of our heritage that were prepared for us by family—usually mothers or grandmothers. Comfort foods include the foods of our heritage. These oftentimes are ethnic. It has been proven through research and study that when a culture is assimilated into a master culture through immigration, the heritage food of ethnic origin is the last item that people will give up to the master culture. There is something deeply special about the foods that come to us through our ethnic heritage. We never forget. Comfort foods could be religious in origin like Kosher foods or the offerings at a protestant church supper. These foods are basic, comforting, and warming to both body and soul. They are more often than not tied to some warm and golden memory of youth, usually tied to a favorite relative or family friend. These foods are loved and remembered, but not really made in most homes anymore. So, they become part of the restaurant experience where the restaurateurs and chefs take advantage of customers unending desires for the "comfort of home."

Contemporary cuisine approaches comfort foods in multiple ways. Take a standard American comfort food dish such as meatloaf and mashed potatoes. It can simply be presented as we remember from our youth with great satisfaction simply for the fact that we don't commonly get these foods today at home. Many people are very satisfied to have them exactly as they remember them. An alternative approach would be to create a lower fat version such as creating meatloaf with ground chicken or turkey rather than beef and pork, and mashed potatoes with chicken stock, fat free milk or yogurt instead of cream and butter and perhaps seasoning the potatoes with curry powder or another strong spice or fresh herbs to "replace" the flavor of fat. This incorporates healthy, lowfat cooking into the dish, another characteristic of contemporary cuisine. We could also take meatloaf and mashed potatoes to the next level of development by practicing the modern cooking style known as deconstruction.

Deconstruction

An important contemporary approach to classic dishes is called deconstruction. This is in the same vein as deconstruction that is a style in literature and art. Through deconstruction dictates and traditions are torn down and laid bare and the subject is built back up using creativity and imagination. For meatloaf and mashed potatoes one could practice deconstruction in a number of different ways. For instance, an entirely different method could be used in the preparations. The mashed potatoes could become a soft, creamy center to a meat-encased item—like a fritter. In Middle Eastern cuisine the dish kibbe combines ground meat, seasonings, bulghur wheat, and water. It is used as an outer casing to a similar filling that is deep-fried giving a crispy on the outside and soft in the center. This method would use the characteristics of contemporary cuisine of creativity and ethnic and international cooking.

Another example would be to reverse the styles of the food as they are served. The potatoes could become like the meatloaf in form by mixing them with cornmeal to make something with the texture of polenta, that could be molded into a loaf shape perhaps layering it alternately with white and sweet potato—chilling this then slicing it and pan-frying it to give a crispy exterior and soft interior—something closer to the texture of meatloaf than mashed potatoes. The meat could take the potatoes textural position by taking a quality cut of meat like tenderloin and making a ragu or stew in a rich sauce that is cooking in a way that it is very soft and it could be molded in a mound somewhat similar to traditional mashed potatoes.

Deconstruction as a method allows the chef to take a comfort food of the past (rooted in tradition) and apply healthy, lowfat cooking, ethnic origins, creativity, and flavor to take something that is known to most diners to a new level which may both comfort and challenge the diner at the same time.

Integrity of Ingredients

Contemporary cuisine approaches the ingredient with the utmost respect. One of the characteristics of this style of cooking is to take each ingredient and respect the integrity of that ingredient as much as possible. This means that the ingredients that are used have to be of the highest possible quality that can be acquired. Freshness is paramount. Food as living, organic matter contains good flavor based upon how the life in the product is treated. The method that was used to raise the ingredient is also important. Organic products taste better than industrially produced products. Conditions of the soil, weather, and how the ingredient is harvested and processed make huge differences in the end result that lands on the diner's plate. Respecting the integrity of the ingredient also means limiting the number of ingredients in a dish to as few as possible. Fewer flavors confuse the palate less and preserve the respect for each individual ingredient to a greater extent. As the great pastry chef Emily Luchetti (2004 James Beard Outstanding Pastry Chef of the Year) of Farallon Restaurant in San Francisco has said, no more than three flavors on a plate at a time, anything more muddies the waters. It is better to use the finest, most outstanding ingredients you can find, prepare them to the utmost of your ability, and add items that will accentuate the flavor of the ingredients without imposing on, or masking, the original flavor.

Terroir

The French have a term that relates to this integrity that is used in the wine industry. It is **terroir**. Terroir generally translates as “of the earth.” The way that the term is used indicates the importance of the microcosm of where a food is grown and how it is raised. This term goes along with the concept of preserving the integrity of each ingredient.

Another concept that relates to the integrity of the ingredient is Slow Food.

Fast Food/Slow Food

The Slow Food Movement is a semi-political food movement which had its beginnings in Northern Italy in response to the first McDonalds being opened there. Because of longstanding traditions in that region of Italy for fine food and dining the purists wanted to preserve what they had and fight the imposition of something that they felt was the antithesis of everything that fine dining stood for, fast food. Since those beginnings, Slow Food has become an international phenomenon. There are about six chapters of Slow Food in the Bay Area of San Francisco. The Movement has produced an educational program in Argenzia, Italy, creating the world’s first program of its type, The University of the Science of Gastronomy. I have copied a passage from the Slow Food website that better explains what they are about. The purpose in this study is to convey the importance of savoring and enjoying fine food. Contemporary cuisine is in its own way the opposite of the fast food movement. Here is the information from the Slow Food website:

The Italian association was founded in 1986 and its birth was celebrated in Barolo in the Langhe district in the province of Cuneo. The international movement was founded in Paris in 1989. The definition contained in its Manifesto conveys a very clear message: a movement for the protection of the right to taste.

If Slow Food has grown into a large-scale international movement, with over 60,000 members in all five continents (of whom about half in Italy), it is precisely because the concept of ‘pleasure’ is a complex one encompassing many meanings and involving many aspects of our existence.

*Slow Food’s main offices, situated in Bra (Cuneo), a small town in southern Piedmont, employ about 100 people. They are the hub of a close-knit network of local grassroots offices in Italy and abroad, the so-called *convivia*, which promote the movement by staging events, debates and other initiatives. Thanks to the hard work and enthusiasm of their managers, collaborators and members, they provide continuous feedback to the central offices in Bra.*

*Slow Food also boasts a publishing company, Slow Food Editore, which specializes in tourism, food and wine. Its catalogue now contains about 40 titles and it also publishes *Slow*, ‘a herald of taste and culture’, in five languages: Italian, English, French, German and Spanish.*

*Slow Food promotes scores of projects and activities, which range from *Le Tavole Fraterne* (or *Friendship Tables*), involving charity work in places where pleasure is hard to find, such as Brazil, the former Yugoslavia, and the areas of Italy hit by earthquakes, to efforts to revive our increasingly endangered biodiversity.*

*The Ark of Taste is a first step in this direction. The aim of this massive project is to identify and catalogue (alas increasingly often) products, dishes and animals that are in danger of disappearing. The operational offshoots of the project are the so-called *Slow Food Presidia*, through which the association provides economic support and a media back-up to groups and individuals pledged to saving an Ark product. To provide public recognition for all this work, the *Slow Food Award* has been introduced, the first edition of which was held in Bologna in October 2000.*

If we wish to enjoy the pleasure which this world can give us, we have to give of our all to strike the right balance of respect and exchange with nature and the environment. This is why we like to define ourselves as ‘eco-gastronomes’ . The fact is that our pleasure cannot be disconnected from the pleasure of others, but it is likewise connected to the equilibrium we manage to preserve (and in many cases revive) with the environment we live in.

*A lot of ground still has to be covered, and much of it will be uphill. But there are many of us and we all have strong legs! We began with the world of wine which has literally changed skin in Italy over the last 15 years, We continued with the complex universe of cheese, creating the two-yearly *Cheese*, an exhibition of all the world’s very finest dairy produce. Now we also organize the *Salone del Gusto* (Hall of Taste), the third edition of which was held in October 2000. These are the major large-scale events we stage to create public awareness. We also devote great energy to what we call *Taste Education* through taste workshops, tasting courses and the books and magazines we publish.*

From awareness to well being and back again! The journey is always a new, various and exciting one. Like in the responses man and nature have found together in the course of the centuries to meet a need - that of pleasure - that is much more complex than mere physical survival.

Source: http://www.slowfood.com/eng/sf_cose/sf_cose.lasso

California Cuisine

Perhaps the defining style leading to the development of what I am describing as contemporary cuisine is what has been termed "California Cuisine." A direct derivative of the French movement of Nouvelle Cuisine of the late 1960's and early 1970's, California Cuisine has its origins in several kitchens of young, creative chefs in the 1970's in both northern and southern California. The names of some of the originators of California Cuisine are Café Beaujolais in Mendocino, Mustards Grille in Napa Valley, Zuni Café in San Francisco, Spago in Beverly Hills, Michael's in Santa Monica, and, most notably, Chez Panisse in Berkeley. Chez Panisse is best positioned to be considered the birthplace of California Cuisine because the time of its birth can be pinpointed to a famous dinner that was held at Chez Panisse in 1976 when the restaurant abandoned its purely French origins to offer a dinner proudly naming products that were from the local region such as Tomales Bay oysters. The menu, though crafted by then executive chef Jeremiah Tower, is not as important as the institution that gave birth to this transition which is owned and operated by Alice Waters, considered the earth mother of California Cuisine. If Alice Waters is the earth mother then Wolfgang Puck of Spago is certainly the hip daddy having abandoned his European training and Austrian origins for the free expression of La La Land, otherwise known as Los Angeles. California Cuisine has much in common with classical French cuisine. They both believe in the integrity of the ingredients, buying products close to the location of the restaurant, using sound fundamental techniques, and keeping the food and the menu concepts as fresh as possible. If one had to pick one cooking method that helped to define California Cuisine it would probably be grilling. Grilling meats, seafood, and vegetables over various woods or other heat sources became the trademark of California Cuisine. California Cuisine is rooted in having an agricultural base that provides something in season at all times and having the finest products growing within a short drive of most restaurants. It also emphasizes the fine wines produced in California. The rise of California wine is coupled with the acceptance of California Cuisine as the standard for excellence in authentic American dining.

Flavor as a Mantra

If one was to survey the nation's greatest chefs as to what was the most important aspect in their cooking, I believe that the majority would answer that it was the development of flavor. There may be some who would insist on proper technique, but from everything I have read flavor is nearly always singled out as being of prime importance. It is easy to understand why. If food doesn't taste good the customer won't return. The chef's greatest desire is that every plate that goes out is perfect. The last thing any of us want is for food to come back to be re-done. We simply don't have the time. But it is more than that. It goes back to that concept of the integrity of the ingredient. If one respects the food then they will accentuate the importance of flavor in a dish. If ethnic and international cuisines are to be looked at, which they will be later, then it is clear to see that the difference between most cuisines is flavor-based. Both Korea and China use soy sauce as a flavor base but in China it is mixed with ginger and rice wine whereas in Korea it is mixed with brown sugar and chile. It is the flavors that separate different world cuisines. Cooks have to be considering

the development of flavor in their cooking at every step of the way. As the chef of all chefs, Escoffier, pointed out more than 100 years ago, without a good stock as the base every dish that follows from that stock will be progressively worse. What he meant was that you have to start with the best quality flavored ingredient and then intensify and add to that flavor as you progress.

Health/Nutrition/Low Fat

One of the real anomalies of the American diet is that the more we know as a people about health, diet, and nutrition, the more we ignore it, especially when we go out to eat. This has been proven over and over in various ways. Clearly we have all heard that America has greater obesity than nearly any other culture in history. The more that nutritionists and medical professionals talk about the dangers of too much red meat in the diet the greater the growth in steakhouses across the country. It has become evident that diets and dieting lead to gaining weight in the end. What does this insanity mean? What should we as culinary professionals take from this knowledge and put into practice? I feel that there is a moral imperative on the part of professional culinarians to buck the trend and do the right thing when it comes to feeding our guests healthy food.

I believe that one of the important characteristics of contemporary cuisine will be to offer healthy, low fat but incredibly delicious and creative meals. I say will be because we are not there yet, by any means. It is so easy to succumb to the perils of unhealthy cooking. The easiest way to boost flavor in most foods is with either salt or high fat dairy products (butter, cream). While we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater and ignore people's desires and those wonderfully flavored ingredients, it is time for a change in the way that we perform the business of our cooking. We know better. We know that diets high in animal-based products lead to the majority of the diseases causing mortality. We know that you are what you eat and if you eat fat and sugar you become fat. We also know from experimentation that we can make delicious and satisfying food by flavoring using alternatives to fat and salt. It is imperative for those who are the practitioners of contemporary cuisine to become masters of lowering fat; lowering or eliminating animal-based ingredients; educating the dining public to the pleasures of this type of food; utilizing those international and ethnic cuisines which are based in a healthier approach to food and cooking, and acquiring real skill as vegetarian and vegan chefs. I know from experience that saying that people won't buy or enjoy this type of food is hogwash. Sometimes it is necessary to open minds. In general, there are many people who would prefer a healthier, lower fat diet, but they have become frustrated and just given up because of two reasons. This type of food requires time and attention if you are preparing it at home. It is so much easier in our busy worlds to just open a box or bag of processed something with high fat and/or sugar to get a quick fix then to take the time to prepare a healthy meal. The other reason is that this type of food is rarely available in the marketplace. Unless you are in an urban environment with numerous options for dining, or in an environment where the individuals are educated and knowledgeable about their diet and health, such as a university environment, it is very difficult to go out and enjoy healthy cuisine. Again, I present this as one of the real anomalies in the American diet. Nonetheless, this is one of the most important aspects in the future of contemporary cuisine.

I am a cardiovascular surgeon infatuated with the challenge and promise of "high tech" medicine and surgery. Nonetheless, I have become convinced that the most overlooked tool in our medical arsenal is harnessing the body's own ability to heal through nutritional excellence.

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Ethnic and International

To be a successful practitioner of contemporary cuisine requires one to have a comprehensive understanding of a variety of international and ethnic cuisines. There are many reasons why this is the case. Firstly, there is the aforementioned historical perspective to contemporary cuisine that is based upon several international cuisines. The most obvious is French classical cuisine but as previously stated, the two oldest organized cuisines on the planet are Chinese and Indian and neither of these would have happened without the influences from the Middle East. Secondly, America as a melting pot has embraced dozens of world cuisines throughout its history that have melded and been adapted to the American culture. This process continues today but the cultures that are forming contemporary American society, and the increase in international business that is occurring requires that today's culinary practitioners offer authentic international and ethnic cuisines rather than ones that are adapted. Thirdly, the ingredients, cooking techniques, and tools that are indigenous to the multitude of international and ethnic cuisines provide a palette of choices for developing flavors and creating intriguing dishes that expand the horizon for the practitioner of contemporary cuisine. There is definitely something very enlightening about cooking and adapting the cuisines of other cultures. I feel that in some way it connects us with people from all around the globe.

From the first such surveys that were done in the early 1960's to the most recent surveys done forty five years later the three top international cuisines of the American dining public remain the same: Italian, Chinese, and Mexican. One might guess differently with the advent of Vietnamese, Thai, and Korean cuisines since the 60's, but this is stable. To me it shows the strength of those three cuisines rather than the weakness of the choice of the American dining public. America has been a perfect home for various world cuisines. The culture has accepted nearly all different types of cuisine from Ethiopian to Lebanese to Laotian. We are blessed with many choices of ethnic and international cuisines because of our history as a melting pot and our tolerance for many cultures. The chef is equally blessed to be able to pick and chose from many types of cuisines. A chef who is bored with their work just isn't trying hard enough. The applicability to contemporary cuisine is through the chef's ingenuity and acceptance of other cultures' cuisines. The heritage of world cuisines allows both the chef and diner to sprout wings and travel the world.