

popular media the full-time housewife had sunk to approximately the level once occupied by single women. She was more and more likely to be portrayed as the object of pity."⁶⁵ Men were now expected to contribute to housework, and the old idea that home cooking was an exclusively female pursuit became passé. Husbands were no longer confined to the backyard barbecue ghetto, and the kitchen was no longer the mysterious female sanctum sanctorum, where displays of masculine competence were signs of effeminacy.⁶⁶

Yet the changing attitudes hardly bespoke a clear feminist victory, for cooking's rising status in itself made it an acceptable male pursuit. In a way, this represented a reversal of the process of "feminization," in which traditionally male occupations lose status when they become predominantly female. As more males mastered home cooking, its status rose; as its status rose, it became more acceptable for males to do it. This was reflected in the media: As the food pages of major newspapers stopped being mere filler around supermarket ads and drew closer to the journalistic mainstream, accomplished journalists such as Raymond Sokolov, William Rice, and John Hess joined Craig Claiborne in what had previously been a decidedly low-status journalistic ghetto. The media now featured prominent celebrities such as actors Danny Kaye and Walter Matthau and Hollywood director John Frankenheimer as outstanding home cooks: standing at their woks and restaurant-gauge stoves, being creative in the kitchen. Home cooking, which had been regarded as quintessentially feminine—an expression of women's nurturing, emotional, and intuitive nature—could now assume what was regarded as a decidedly masculine cast. "Cooking and law are quite similar," said a Manhattan attorney who had been a star pupil at two cooking schools. "With both, there's the challenge of problem-solving, logic and reasoning."⁶⁷ The new machismo in the kitchen also brought the decline of the "man-pleasing" dish.⁶⁸ While gender differences over quantity remained, foods themselves, like clothing and hair styles, became more "uni-sex."⁶⁹ But this one tendency toward a more homogeneous diet could hardly counterbalance the powerful trends toward segmentation, diversity, and choice. The contemporaneous boom in eating out, for one, helped to present Americans with an array of food choices that was more dizzying than ever.



Fast Foods and Quick Bucks

Mentioning that I am writing about modern American eating almost invariably evokes the comment: "Oh, the rise of fast foods—McDonald's and all of that." This is particularly true abroad; from the Champs Elysées and Piccadilly to the Ginza and Tienanmen Square, McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken are regarded as the quintessential symbols of how Americans eat—successors to those hallmarks of the postwar years, the can opener and home freezer. It is obvious why this is so. For one thing, until recently most served only distinctively American foods: hamburgers, batter-coated fried chicken, milk shakes, and cola drinks. The teenaged help maneuvering among the gadgetry behind the counters with the precision of well-drilled football teams also seemed fitting reflections of the American obsession with time- and labor-saving. Only in America, it seemed, could anyone aim—as Burger King initially did—to serve customers a complete meal in fifteen seconds. The franchise system upon which they grew seemed to represent a happy marriage between the two forms of capital thought to have made America great: the hard-working, risk-taking individual franchisee and the organizational skills, know-how, and promotional capabilities of the giant corporation.

Of course, none of these things was new in itself. Americans' reputation for eating quickly stretched back to the early years of the republic. There were self-service restaurants doling out quick lunches to white-collar workers who ordered them at a counter and took them to a table to eat in New York and Chicago in the early twentieth century, where their boisterous bustle earned them the nickname "smash-and-grab places." Other kinds of self-service restaurants, such as cafeterias, have roots almost equally deep. Nor, as we have seen, were franchising and drive-ins new in the 1960s. As for technology, while Burger King's famed "Insta-broiler," which turned out cooked hamburgers in gravy on rolls at the rate of four hundred an hour, was indeed impressive, such contraptions were also common in other kinds of 1950s restaurants.

But by the late 1960s, the drive-ins with call-boxes and Rube Goldberg-esque serving machines had faded away, and "automatic restaurants" such

as Pat Boone Dine-O-Mat, Buy-O-Mat, and White Tower's Tower-O-Matic, with their frozen, microwavable foods, hardly left a mark; they had been supplanted by the new, limited-menu, self-service fast food chains.¹ These burgeoning outlets had triumphed because to consumers they seemed to combine all of the advantages of lightning-fast service, drive-in convenience, and the economies of mass production techniques. To their owners, they also held the promise of a well-disciplined labor force immune to the vagaries of traditional restaurant workers. (One reason the McDonald brothers fired their attractive female carhops and converted to a drive-in format was that they suspected that the girls were more interested in selling their bodies than the hamburgers. They developed their militarized production system, using teenaged boys, to—in the words of one McDonald—free themselves from “drunken fry cooks and dishwashers.”)²

But there was more to the new chains' success than this ability to put all of these virtues into a new package. At the outset, at least, they also tapped into something that had fueled the rise of earlier chains: American concern for restaurant hygiene. Ever since the germ theory of disease swept America in the late nineteenth century, smart restaurateurs had profited from Americans' fretfulness over the cleanliness of what emerged from the world hidden behind the swinging kitchen doors. The nation's first successful chain, the Fred Harvey System, which arose with the germ theory, had been based on confidence in the cleanliness of the food served in often woe-begotten railroad stations by the immaculate “Harvey Girls.” Soon thereafter John R. Thompson of Chicago had built one of the great chains of urban restaurants on the basis of white tile, bright lights, and gleaming dining rooms. After the First World War, companies like White Castle, White Tower, and Horn and Hardart did very well by following in this path. When Walter Anderson and Edgar Ingram founded the White Castle hamburger chain in the 1920s, they sought, in Ingram's words, to “break down a deep-seated prejudice against chopped beef” and modeled their stands on Chicago's water tower, making them “white for purity.”³ This was also, as we have seen, the key to White Tower's success, as well as a reason for the nation's confidence in Duncan Hines. Ray Kroc, the mastermind behind the rise of McDonald's as a national chain, hoed the same row, although with unusual vigor. Personally fastidious, on weekends he himself joined in cleaning his own Des Plaines, Illinois, outlet, hosing down the garbage cans and scraping chewing gum off the green cement in front of the store with a putty knife.⁴ Like their predecessors, the structures under the golden arches featured sparkling white tile, but Kroc also added great swaths of glass, putting the food preparation into a virtual fishbowl. “You could see the cleanliness,” said Edward Schmitt, McDonald's president. “How many restaurants are there in the United States where you can look into the food facilities and preparation area?”⁵

In fact, as we have seen, Schmitt was crediting his boss with innovations that had long preceded him. One could watch the counterman prepare one's hamburger in scrupulously clean surroundings at White Tower too,

pay as little for it as at McDonald's, and even have it made to order. Yet White Tower and the others withered while McDonald's flourished. Why? Here is where Kroc's real genius lay: He had an unerring sense of how to exploit the new demographics. By 1960 most White Towers, White Castles, Horn and Hardarts, and other fast food chains were still in the inner cities, often in fraying surroundings that bespoke a migrated white working class. Kroc, aiming straight at the families that had created the baby boom, would not go near the center city. He concentrated instead on the new commercial strips of the suburbs. “Where White Tower had tied hamburgers to public transportation and the workingman . . . McDonald's tied hamburgers to the car, children, and the family.”⁶ As a McDonald's president subsequently explained, targeting the suburbs “was a conscious effort to go for the family business. That meant going after the kids.”⁷

Aiming at baby boom families meant that McDonald's turned its back on those enthusiastic drive-in patrons of the mid-1950s, teenagers. Deliberately setting out to create an “antijoint” climate, Kroc went to extraordinary lengths to prevent McDonald's restaurants from becoming teenage hangouts. He banned jukeboxes, vending machines, and even telephones from his outlets and, like the McDonald brothers, refused to hire females. (Teenaged female staff, he said, “attract the wrong kind of boys.”)⁸ The outlets' cleanliness was also intended to mark them off from the conventional drive-ins, which often sat amidst swirling clouds of discarded napkins and teenage litter. Franchisees were also enjoined to burnish the family-friendly image by supporting local family-oriented community functions.⁹ Discovering that children determined where three out of four families ate, McDonald's set out to make visits to its outlets “fun experiences,” with special giveaways and packages for children's meals. By 1970 the many millions the corporate giant spent on child-oriented television advertising and local promotions had succeeded in making its clown mascot, Ronald McDonald, identifiable by fully 96 percent of American children, making him second only to Santa Claus on that score.¹⁰

Kentucky Fried Chicken also enjoyed unprecedented success (in the late 1960s its sales volume exceeded that of McDonald's) by cultivating a family image to attract suburban baby boomers. It was founded in 1954, the same year Kroc made his famous deal with the McDonald brothers to franchise the system they had pioneered in California, by Harlan Sanders, another dropout (Kroc dropped out of high school; Sanders left after grade seven). Prominent in its marketing was the avuncular, white-haired, white-goateed, white-suited “Colonel” Sanders amiably presiding over happily munching children.¹¹ As was so often the case, Burger King played catch-up in the image game. Its little cartoon “Burger King,” attired in royal robe and crown, tried to assure children that it too was a fun place to eat, but Ronald—all image and no personality—and the genial Colonel (who was actually quite a hothead) could not be matched.¹²

While not yet a bona fide fast food, pizza was soon giving the fast foods a run for the consumer's money. By the mid-1950s, thanks to the popular-

ity of spaghetti and tomato sauce, a taste for a white farinaceous base slathered in thick and salty tomato sauce had become an integral part of the American palate. The country was therefore well primed for the invasion of pizza. Yeast bread dough flattened and baked with a tomato sauce topping had appeared in Naples as early as the seventeenth century, not too long after the tomato was introduced into Europe from America. By the late nineteenth century, it had become common to add mozzarella cheese to the topping too, but the dish remained mainly a local Neapolitan speciality: a poor people's food that evoked little interest outside the town and decreasing interest within it. It was given a new life, however, in bakeries in some of the East Coast's Little Italies, which began turning out versions of it soon after the turn of the century.¹³ By the 1920s it was a common sight, if not a major seller, at Italian festivals in New York City.¹⁴

In the 1950s, however, pizza suddenly burst onto center stage. In part this was because it fit so well in the culture of the times. It was regarded as an ideal family food, equally acceptable to all ages and both sexes. Its taste hardly departed from the tried and true, yet its form could be readily accommodated to the era's newer, more casual ways of eating: children's parties and snacking in front of the television set. The informal, communal way it was eaten in restaurants made it particularly popular with teenagers, and by the mid-1950s boisterous "pizza parlors" dotted the main streets of Italian neighborhoods, their oversized booths for six or eight crammed with voracious young eaters, while others lounged by the entrance waiting for take-home orders. "A trip to Wooster Street for Vinnie's or Sal's thin crusted, aromatic cheese and sausage pizzas was a gustatory event," recalled an ex-New Haven aficionada of Jewish origin. "No short cuts, no tricks, just the mouth scorching mozzarella and the olive oil dripping down our chins, the delicate tomato sauce and the pile of filthy napkins on worn formica tables."¹⁵ Pizza also became the hottest restaurant item of the 1950s because, unlike most pastas, it was not particularly affected by delays between cooking and eating. This made it ideal for the two main growth sectors in the television-battered restaurant industry, drive-ins and take-home places. By 1956 it had shunted aside hot dogs as the most popular item in both.¹⁶ By the late 1960s, Americans were consuming two billion pizzas annually, using six hundred million pounds of mozzarella cheese and eight hundred million pounds of tomatoes in the process.¹⁷

By then the major problem that stood in the way of pizza becoming a real fast food—the crust—was on its way to solution. To make a traditional crust, after the breadlike dough had risen it had to be weighed, cut, stretched, and flattened, often by tossing it in the air. The sauce was then slathered on, toppings were added, and it was baked for about twenty minutes, bringing total preparation time after the dough had risen to almost thirty minutes. Greek-Americans, who had been opening storefront pizzerias on the East Coast since the early 1950s, now discovered that the day's supply of pizza dough could be rolled out in the morning and refrigerated in ten-inch pans, ready to be quickly topped and baked in the same pan when ordered. While

it made for a flatter, thinner crust, this drastically reduced labor costs and made the mealtime rush more manageable.¹⁸ But the new method was also a boon for franchised chains such as Wichita-based Pizza Hut, which turned pizza into a true fast food. They developed a method for freezing the dough in a central commissary, from where they sent them to their outlets to be slathered with toppings and quickly baked on conveyors in special infrared ovens.¹⁹

By the mid-1960's McDonald's had already set many an American to salivating, not over its food, but by becoming the first franchised food operation to "go public" with a stock issue. The immense amount of cash this put in Kroc's pocket aroused many others to dream of a double killing; huge profits might be made on both up-front franchise fees and a stock flotation. So frenzied did the atmosphere become that sharp promoters, such those behind Lum's, a chain whose main innovation was a hot dog steamed in beery liquid, made enormous profits by floating stock even before they had sold a significant number of franchises. Some had little more to offer than a celebrity's name—Johnny Carson, Joe Namath, Mickey Mantle—and a pie-in-the-sky prospectus. In 1968 even John Y. Brown, Jr., the mastermind behind the rise of Kentucky Fried Chicken, was gulled by a debonair, smooth-talking Englishman into having KFC pay an outrageous sum for the shares of his H. Salt Fish and Chips chain, a company with remarkably poor prospects in America. (Among other things, KFC discovered—too late—that many Americans did not know that chips are french fries.)²⁰

Inevitably, in the early 1970s most of the high flyers came down to earth, many with a thud. Minnie Pearl's Fried Chicken's stock sank from \$23.00 to 12½ cents before disappearing under a different name.²¹ Even KFC, still the industry leader, dropped from \$55 a share in April 1969 to \$23 a year later.²² However, about fifty franchising chains staggered along, hoping to be acquired, merged, or gobbled up. Many were: Burger King took over Carrol's and Burger Chef; Gino's merged into Roy Rogers. At the same time, food processors looking to diversify were tempted to expand into this related field. Pillsbury's had acquired Burger King in 1967. Now, Hueblein took over KFC, Ralston Purina bought Jack-in-the-Box, General Foods began a disastrous fling with Burger Chef, and Pepsico took over Pizza Hut. The same forces of concentration that had transformed food production, processing, and distribution had caught up with the new fast food industry.

The small entrepreneur was soon being squeezed out at the lowest level, that of the individual franchisee, as the cost of franchises in the more successful chains climbed to well out of reach of those without substantial resources. Blocs of franchises in the lucrative chains were controlled by very large investors. After 1976 Pizza Hut would not even sell franchises to individual investors.²³ The hope of getting a franchise in a successful chain became a pipe dream for the proverbial "ambitious little guy." In 1980 a prospective franchisee in a not-too-promising Mexican chain such as

Taco Time or Taco John's had to come up with \$35,000 (including a \$10,000 to \$15,000 franchise fee), plus \$100,000 to \$150,000 for land and a building.²⁴ Increasingly, parent companies themselves took up new franchises and repurchased older ones.²⁵ At the same time, to compete with the giants, with their huge promotional budgets, by opening an independent outlet became a generally foolhardy proposition.²⁶

So, despite the paeans of industry leaders such as Kroc to the spirit of entrepreneurship, the fast food chains helped snuff out a traditional entry point into the ranks of the self-employed for aspiring but capital-poor working people. For at least two generations the dream of renting a storefront, purchasing some used restaurant equipment, establishing a meager line of credit with some food suppliers, and opening a small restaurant had inspired many ambitious and hard-working Americans. Now, these dreams were headed in the same direction as previous rural aspirations to go into food-processing or urban hopes of opening neighborhood grocery stores.²⁷

Kroc, the Colonel, and the other leaders in the fast food race had made their bundles by following the baby boomers as they progressed through childhood and adolescence. In the later 1960s, when they were teenagers, McDonald's—spurred by a labor shortage and new federal antidiscrimination laws—even began hiring females. In the 1970s, as the teenagers turned into young adults, the chains followed with a wholesale shift to "family-style" restaurants. Inviting brick and shingles replaced glitzy exteriors; cozy mansard roofs replaced soaring angular ones; glaring white tile and fluorescent lights were replaced by warm wood, posters, greenery, and softer lights. The old concept of discouraging patrons from lingering and forcing them to eat off the premises was the first to go. Burger King began installing tables in 1967; McDonald's followed in 1968.²⁸ In the 1970s the seats were made softer and the tables enlarged. The policy of confining the labor force as much as possible to behind the counter, where contact with the patrons was polite but curt, was altered. Now, friendly hosts greeted patrons and oversaw the queues, buspeople roamed about, and in some cases there was even table service. New lighter entrees such as fish were introduced, and salads and salad bars began to appear. Industry veterans shook their heads as McDonald's began serving fish, Burger King croissants, Bonanza chicken, and Long John Silver's wine. Pizza chains began serving hot sandwiches, submarines, pasta, wine, and even seafood.²⁹

The chains also sought to adjust to what appeared to be the breakup of the traditional family structure. Many of the young adult boomers postponed or even rejected marriage in favor of more informal ways of living together. Those who did formalize their unions did not produce children at anything near the 1950s rate. However, they did take to divorcing at an all-time high rate, adding to the number of people living alone, with other singles, or in single-parent families. When their numbers were combined with a byproduct of the pathology of urban slum life—soaring rates of teenage pregnancy and fatherless families—the resulting statistics seemed to

portray those living in traditional two-parent, two-and-a-half-child families, with mother home doing the cooking, as museum pieces. In March 1977 the Labor Department reported that the concept of a family in which "the husband is the only breadwinner and the wife is a homemaker out of the labor force and there are children" now applied to only seven out of every hundred households. Half of all households were now composed of single men or women or married couples without children. Almost all of the people in this category, male and female, worked outside the home and had little time or inclination for home food preparation. "When I was married I ate out maybe twice a week," a divorced male Kansas City executive told a reporter in 1977. "Now I eat out five nights a week. I like to be with people. I seldom go to a supermarket."³⁰

The fast food chains responded by abandoning their exclusive concentration on the suburbs and opening outlets in and near the glass office towers through which hundreds of thousands of these white-collar workers hurried each day. Special breakfast and dinner items were introduced in the hopes of enticing them to stop by on their way to and from work. They mounted campaigns to entice females in particular to drop in at any time of day; McDonald's asserted, "You Deserve a Break Today." Statistics of all kinds attested to their success. By 1977 the proportion of the American food dollar spent on food outside of the home had risen to over 35 percent, up ten percentage points from 1954. Most of this increase was accounted for by fast food establishments.³¹ By 1983 there were already three times as many fast food outlets as in 1963—more than 122,500. Their thirty-four-billion-dollar intake amounted to about 40 percent of all public eating place sales.³²

Market research indicated that many fast food patrons were peripatetic diners who ate on impulse and had little brand loyalty. Many of them also ate out so often that monotony became a threat.³³ The slightest differences in menu, service, price, or promotion could thus be all-important. Some fast service restaurants therefore sought diversity by adding ethnic touches to their menus. As was the case with processing, this need not involve much real change. "Foreign and ethnic foods are all the rage these days," said *Fast Service* magazine, but all that was needed to "ethnicize" a menu was to change some of the spicing. "To make something German, don't hire a German cook, just give your roast beef a topping of German-style sauerkraut, that is, canned sauerkraut with some caraway seed added. Mix oregano, basil and garlic with canned tomatoes, add chicken, and you have an unusual Italian hero sandwich. For Chinese, add one or more of: ginger, anise seed, garlic, onions, red pepper, fennel seed, cloves, or cinnamon."³⁴

Some entrepreneurs tried to develop fast food chains based entirely on one regional or foreign-sounding cuisine, but none could rival the giants serving American-style food. Even Oriental food, so popular in full-service restaurants, fell flat as fast food, largely because almost everything in its repertoire was unsuitable for flash freezing. Pizza chains were no exception to this generalization, for by then pizza had for the most part lost its Italian

connotations. Indeed, part of Pizza Hut's success derived from a mid-1970s campaign to "Americanize" its image, which included replacing the pizza-tossing Italian chef on its logo with an outline of a roof.³⁵

Only Mexican chains achieved significant success, but this was mainly because they were able to piggyback on pizza. What they called tacos, burritos, and so on were essentially a variation on pizza: a flattened dough topped with tomato-flavored meat sauces, some vegetables, and cheese. The pancakes were smaller, folded, and often crisper, but the step from pizza to tacos was hardly more daring than the one that had led Americans of the 1950s from pasta to pizza. Mexican fast food also received a boost from the national mania for snack food. The popularity of corn chips spurred supermarket sales of taco shells—most of which are really large, folded corn chips—and sauces and fillings to go with them, helping to create a core of consumers who were then willing to risk Mexican fast food.³⁶

Still, the Mexican connotation was a handicap. When Pepsico took over Taco Bell in 1978 and began expanding it from its southwestern base, it mounted a campaign to assure customers that its tacos were no more spicy or un-American-tasting than hamburgers.³⁷ Others followed suit. "There is no problem with consumer acceptance of Mexican food," a Taco Time spokesman assured a trade journal, for it was "seasoned to American taste."³⁸ In 1982, as Taco Bell planned a further expansion campaign, market researchers warned against promoting the food as Mexican. In particular, they said, Americans distrusted Mexican restaurants as dirty. As a result, Mexican allusions were banished from Taco Bell's decor and menus, and its original symbol—a sleeping Mexican in a sombrero—was replaced by a bell.³⁹ The places of origin of Taco Bell's competitors—Eugene, Oregon (Taco Time), Wyoming (Taco John's), Ogden, Utah (Taco Maker), Topeka, Kansas (Taco Casa), Chicago (Pepe's), and Mississippi (Pedro's Fine Mexican Foods)—hardly augured any more commitment to a Mexican identity, and most followed suit.⁴⁰ Thanks to this bowdlerization process, by the late 1980s Taco Bell had led the Mexican sector into a 5 percent share of an otherwise overwhelmingly American-style business, but by then it was questionable whether anyone but Mexicans should have considered it foreign food.⁴¹

Full-service restaurant chains were more successful in ethnicizing their menus. The more formal ones had initially taken quite a beating from the fast food chains, whose informality fit in better with the mood of the late 1960s.⁴² The perennial labor problem seemed to lock all full-service restaurants into increasing dependence on preportioned, mainly frozen, generally nondescript dishes. By 1975 giant food service corporations turning out bland dishes in huge central facilities had a virtual hammerlock on the \$2.8 billion restaurant-supply market. The larger full-service chains merely emulated them. In 1975 one of them, Quality Inns International, tried to raise quality and cut costs by "cooking from scratch," but the bold experiment soon ran aground on the shoals of labor costs, the very factor that had led to frozen foods' triumph in the first place. When the more skilled kitchen workers

needed for the new/old system demanded wages as high as six dollars an hour, a Quality spokesman announced, "We're just not paying that kind of money," and the firm returned to the frosted fold.⁴³ A New York woman who applied for a job as a cook at the Stouffer's chain was told that they did not need cooks, only "thawer-outers."⁴⁴

In the mid-1970s, however, the food service corporations began expanding their repertoire by offering frozen French-sounding dishes to "Continental" restaurants. (Calvin Trillin now quipped that the continent in question must be Antarctica.) Then, in the later 1970s, as restaurateurs realized that patrons were alarmingly peripatetic in searching for ever more varied eating experiences, they began turning out ethnic and American regional-sounding dishes. These dishes not only struck the requisite note of informality, but they also promised greater profit margins, because most used more starch and less meat. Now restaurateurs facing what a restaurant industry magazine called "the seeming inconsistency—if not downright madness" of divergent patron tastes could, at the flick of a teenager's wrist, serve any or all of frozen quiches, crepes, lasagne, cannelloni, fettucini, or burritos alongside the usual array of steaks, burgers, and chicken fingers.⁴⁵ Bennigan's, Pillsbury's chain of "casual restaurants," featured croissant sandwiches and tacos as well as Cajun-style burgers and barbecued back ribs.⁴⁶ "Theme" restaurant chains, such as Victoria Station, whose Casey Jones-clad cooks worked in the open amidst old cabooses and gas lamps, also fostered the illusion of diversity.⁴⁷ Some industry consultants, such as Lippincott and Margulises in New York and S&O Consultants in San Francisco, specialized in developing not new recipes or foods but new themes. Working for Pillsbury's Steak & Ale subsidiary, S&O devised a chain called Orville Bean's Flying Machine and Fixit Shop—decorated with the fictitious inventor's contraptions such as steam-driven roller skates and an electric fork—as well as Juan and Only's, a Mexican restaurant with eclectic displays of old records, photos, and junk. (The themes themselves soon became as throwaway as the decor; to last two years was considered a success.)⁴⁸

Much of the success of fast food and theme restaurant chains was based on their ability to attract working women. Working wives in particular ate out—morning snack, lunch, and dinner—much more than homebound ones. "I eat out at least three times a week," a thirty-year-old medical technologist told the *New York Times* while waiting for her moderately priced meal amidst the wood, greenery, and glass of a Los Angeles Great American Soup Company restaurant in April 1977. "Nobody feels guilty any more if they don't cook every meal at home. There is money to eat out because so many people are working."⁴⁹ By 1985 the average nineteen- to fifty-year-old woman ate 38 percent more of her food (measured in calories) in cafeterias than she had in 1978, 60 percent more in full-service restaurants, and an impressive 120 percent more in fast food outlets.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, supermarket industry leaders had watched in stunned disbelief as the nuclear family, the core of their market, seemed to disintegrate be-

fore their eyes and Americans shunned their own kitchens in favor of other defrosters.⁵¹ In 1960 Americans had spent twenty-six cents of every food dollar away from home; by 1981 thirty-eight cents of every dollar escaped the grocery trade.⁵² While restaurants were the major culprits, take-home outlets also posed an increasing threat. But supermarkets counterattacked by expanding their own offerings of fully prepared foods to take home. Delicatessen counters now commonly featured barbecued chickens, spare ribs, lasagne, and a variety of pasta and other salads, while salad bars sold large arrays of washed, chopped, and sliced vegetables and dressings. The food-processing industries rolled in behind them, developing new products that could be just as easily microwaved at home as by teenagers in a restaurant. As a result, the variety of foods displayed in the supermarkets increased exponentially, as did the size of the stores themselves. The range of choices now available to the shopper made that which had seemed so impressive in the 1950s pale in comparison. At the same time, the choice of where to shop expanded, as chains of smaller markets such as 7-Eleven arose, specializing in prepared and convenience foods aimed at singles or families with working mothers.

The end result of all of this was an incredible extension of the food choices facing Americans. Although they still clung to certain "core" foods and traditional taste "markers," Americans were accompanying them with an ever-increasing variety of "sauces" and eating them in ever less formal fashions. Family meals seemed on the wane, even where traditional family structures survived. Snacking, on the other hand, was becoming a continuous process, indulged in practically at all times in all places. Indeed, it was calculated that three-quarters of all Americans derived at least 20 percent of their energy needs from snacks.⁵³ (This might explain the success of the song "Junk Food Junkie," which climbed to the top of the pop music charts in 1976.)⁵⁴ There were even predictions that among certain middle-class groups, particularly singles, "grazing"—snacking in different locales—would soon almost entirely replace formal meals. When this explosion of options regarding what, where, and when to eat was set against the recurring scares over food and health, the result verged on dietary chaos, at least for the middle and upper classes. Possibly the only thing that could have made matters even more confusing was a competing concern over weight loss, and this, of course, is exactly what was happening.



Paradoxes of Plenty

The Reagan family had hardly unpacked its bags in the White House when Nancy Reagan began choosing new china for her new home. The enormous cost—\$209,508 for 220 gold-embossed place settings—seemed to set the pattern for the rest of the decade, as the Reagans helped make ostentatious wealth more fashionable than it had been since the 1920s. So did their inauguration, a sixteen-million-dollar, multi-venue extravaganza tarnished only somewhat when the building's derelicts and bag ladies invaded the Union Station party and helped themselves to the lobster bisque, shrimp merlin, escargots, and veal laid out for the invited guests.¹ An economic downturn in the early 1980s hardly affected the upper-income beneficiaries of the tax cuts Reagan pushed through soon after assuming office, and the long shadows of foreign challenges to Americans' self-perception as the wealthiest people on earth could still be ignored. Newly rich financial wizards and media culture heroes took new pride in living "Life in the Fast Lane." It was to be the last of the century's ages of abundance: a time—like the 1920s—when American business leaders and their cheerleaders in the White House seemed to have found, in the "magic of the marketplace," the keys to everlasting prosperity.

Nancy Reagan, surrounded by new Sun Belt wealth, presiding over glittering events in her fashionable size 4 outfits, seemed to epitomize the decade. Unlike her immediate predecessors as First Lady, who left the details to their social secretaries, she took a particular interest in the food chef Henry Haller prepared for these functions, asking him to make the platters fancier, the color combinations more striking, and the portions smaller.² Her increasingly cadaverous appearance began to make "Babe" Paley's famous aphorism "you can't be too rich or too thin" look like a sick joke, but the remark seemed to neatly encapsulate the new elite's aspirations. A lust for wealth displaced older ideas of public service in Washington, drove considerations of responsibility to clients, stockholders, and the public from Wall Street boardrooms, and turned Ivory Tower college campuses into centers for glorifying greed.³ Indeed, there was no such thing as "too rich" in a culture that viewed wealth as the ultimate sign of achievement and elevated a way of getting it—"the deal"—into an art. Success was defined