AMERICA EATS

A Very Brief History of Food in America

330+ MILLION IN THE USA

"Food is everything we are. It's an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma." Anthony Bourdain

It wasn't always hamburgers and apple pie – the average American diet has shifted enormously throughout the decades. The cultural, technological, and economic changes that have profoundly shaped American society have also shaped the foods that people eat. In turn, changes in diet through history have affected the way people lived their lives, from their physical health to the way society was built around them. Regardless of what people were doing at any point in history, one thing is consistent: they had to eat.

1700s

In colonial America, people overwhelmingly farmed their own land and rounded out their diets with goods imported from England. European colonists synthesized the dishes of their homelands with the new varieties of food now available to them in North America.

In New England, the versatility of corn helped it take on outsized importance, with cornmeal replacing the wheat that was difficult to grow in northeastern climates. Colonists often struggled to grow food in the rocky soil and ultimately integrated many hunting and agricultural techniques from the indigenous people whose lands they had colonized. Squash and beans, two native crops to the Americas, were quickly integrated into people's daily diets, and colonists supplemented what they got from the land with plenty of seafood, including the oysters and lobsters that are still associated with New England cuisine today.



Colonial Kitchen Fireplace - Burrough-Steelman House, Pennsauken, NJ, Historic American Buildings Survey

In the South, where the weather was more forgiving, even the rural poor could grow many crops and hunt the ample game that populated the countryside. Venison was the most commonly eaten game among the wealthier classes, but the rural poor survived on rabbit, opossum, and squirrel. Many staples that are now associated with southern cuisine, such as black-eyed peas and okra, were brought to North America by enslaved people from western Africa's Igbo ethnic group, now in modern-day Nigeria.

Americans throughout the colonies prepared their food in large, wood-burning ovens, or in kettles hanging over open flames. Several inventions in the second half of the 18th century, including Ben Franklin's "Franklin stove," made it easier to more precisely regulate temperature when cooking. Overall, colonists lacked many of the amenities that would make cooking easier in the final years of the 1700s.[1] Only some types of food could be preserved for eating later, such as salted pork. Farmers used root cellars to keep some crops fresh until they were sold, but food generally had to be eaten soon after it was prepared.

During the American Revolution, political changes led to some culinary changes as well. The abrupt end of tea imports from England made way for coffee to dominate American culture, and sugar taxes decreased the consumption

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of rum in favor of whiskey. Perhaps most critically, the robust networks of food production that had developed throughout the colonial era proved important to the success of the Revolution. American soldiers could rely on supplies from surrounding farms and towns to power their army, as opposed to the cumbersome supply lines that served the British troops.



Dining room place settings at Ventfort Hall, a mansion and Gilded Age museum in Lenox, Massachusetts.

1800s

Not long after the United States became a sovereign nation, the first cotton mills opened in the North, heralding the beginning of industrialization. The vast changes that the Industrial Revolution brought to Americans' lives extended to what and how people ate. Airtight canning, which came to the U.S. in 1819, allowed food to be safely eaten long after cooking, but most Americans were distrustful of the process until the Civil War made food options more limited. Preserved food didn't become widespread until the advent of refrigerated (ice-cooled) railcars in the mid-19th century, which allowed foods like meat and vegetables to remain fresher for much longer. When combined with the expansion of railroads, Americans all over the country now had access to more types and varieties of food than ever previously seen.[2]



Source: USDA National Agricultural Library

National War Garden Commission poster encourages canning during World War I. (1918)

At the same time, the day-to-day schedule of the average American's eating habits began to resemble those of Americans today. As more people began working in factories, Americans moved away from large, family-oriented meals and towards portable meals, often including leftovers from the previous night's dinner that workers could eat on the job. Restaurants popped up to provide lunch for middle class office workers, beginning an aspect of urban life that continues to this day.[3]

As the century progressed, the Gilded Age (1870-1900), an era of rapid economic growth in the U.S., saw mass income stratification throughout the population, and these differences manifested themselves in people's diets. The concentration of wealth in the upper classes led to extravagant behavior by the moneyed elites: the outlandish dinner parties held in Manhattan and Newport, Rhode Island served imported foods spread across several courses in accordance with strict social etiquette so as to show off the upper crust's wealth and refinement.[4]

By contrast, insufficient food among the working classes created the conditions for a number of social movements, from settlement houses providing educational and healthcare services for new immigrants to the anarchist movements that organized many of the urban poor. At the same time, the rise in immigration from previously unrepresented countries meant that the types of cuisines available to the average American became more expansive than ever. Immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, South America, and Eastern Asia introduced new types of dishes and food items to the American palate.[5] Spaghetti, hamburgers, and tamales gained their footholds in American culture thanks to the restaurants and corner stores opened by immigrants in the 19th century. This, in turn, shaped American conceptions of various cuisines for years to come. For instance, because the first wave of Chinese immigrants to the United States overwhelmingly came from current day Guangdong Province (formerly Canton) in southern China, American Chinese food is strongly influenced by the Cantonese style and bears little resemblance to much of the food eaten elsewhere in China.[6]

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By the 1920s, Jell-O was a staple in American kitchens. During the Depression, cooks created new economical recipes using gelatin.

The Early 1900s and the Great Depression

Processed foods (foods changed through industrial processes from their original forms), entered the American diet around the turn of the century, with food no longer just preserved through refrigeration but now containing chemical preservatives to withstand long transport and changes in temperature. Modern staples including Hellman's Mayonnaise and Oreo cookies were introduced in this period and represent a turning point in the composition of the American diet.[7]

With more food processed in factories, concern over food safety began to grow, aided by the mass-published exposés of "muckraking" journalists who exposed corruption in government and business. Upton Sinclair's famous novel *The Jungle* was written to call attention to the dangerous and inhumane conditions of meat-factory workers in 1900s Chicago, but is ultimately better known for the horror it inspired when people learned of the processes that went into producing their food. Such investigative reporting led to the enactment of the first federal food safety and inspection laws.

The U.S. entry into World War I led to rationing of some food items, and prices for wheat and corn were set at government-mandated rates. Many farmers overworked their land and held on to large harvests in the hope of better profits in the future. When these better profits failed to materialize, food markets were flooded with products and the prices of crops crashed. Paradoxically, the abundance of available food set the stage for the Great Depression. This weakening of a crucial part of the economic chain was one of the reasons why the stock market crash was as brutal for the overall economy as it ultimately was; food prices would not recover for the duration of the Great Depression.[8]

The far-ranging impacts of the economic collapse had an effect on food that is one of the most visceral reminders of what life was like for the average American during the Great Depression. People, particularly women who were in charge of feeding their families, designed new ways of cooking that stretched ingredients to last longer and survive better in refrigerated environments. Most families used ice boxes, which used large blocks of ice to keep things cool, while wealthier families used the modern refrigerators that would become more widespread in the 1950s. Casseroles, peanut butter, and gelatin all became common parts of the American diet during the Depression.

Many of the unemployed relied on food relief from the government during the Depression. The home economics specialists overseeing these relief programs favored bland foods that would provide nutrition yet would encourage recipients to find jobs and not rely too long on food support. They also considered spicy foods to be stimulants that should be avoided.[9] These culinary changes may have led to some of the stereotypes of traditional American food as unseasoned and unappetizing that persist to this day.



Surplus Commodities: School Lunch Program, ca. (1936)

Additionally, New Deal programs expanded the number of students with access to daily food through nutritious school lunches, which were seen as an effective way to keep American children fed even if their families lacked adequate food at home. This development remains in place today, where millions of students around the United States may receive their only meals of the day at school.

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Post-War and Beyond

As the American economy stabilized during World War II and grew steadily in the post-war years, American food became more varied and interesting. Increasing prosperity and the growing middle class led to more women staying home with their families and cooking more elaborate meals with an international flavor. Julia Child ("The French Chef") became a national cooking icon, the forerunner of today's Food Network stars. Anglo-Americans became more interested in the foods of immigrant communities, spurred by both the experiences of American soldiers returning from war and rising globalization, making more types of food immediately accessible to suburban and rural residents.



Oldest operating McDonald's restaurant in the world, Los Angeles, CA. Opened in 1953.



Frozen TV dinners became popular in the 1950s. The originally came wrapped in foil for heating in the oven. In 1987, they transitioned to microwaveable trays.

At the same time, Americans were drawn to foods that were cheap and convenient. Processed foods like "TV dinners," frozen heat-and-serve meals to eat in front of the television, were handy for the many women who both worked outside the home and were still in charge of the domestic sphere. From the 1950s onward, the quantities and varieties of processed foods, designed for shelf stability and palatability rather than nutrition, expanded. Once microwave ovens became commonplace in American homes in the 1980s, the range of processed convenience foods grew even more. The subsidies that stabilized the American corn market after the devastation of the Great Depression encouraged food producers to use high fructose corn syrup rather than the more expensive cane sugar in many groceries. Sophisticated manufacturing techniques created the mass production of everything from meat to potato chips to soda. Many of our largest and most popular fast-food chains got their start during the 1950s. By the 1980s, fast-food restaurants accounted for 40 percent of all U.S. restaurants.[10]

As the amount of sugar, processed food, and fast food became a bigger part of the American diet, waistlines increased too. Modern "diet culture" took off in the 1960s as the average American's weight trended upwards and people from all stripes of life sought to lose weight through a return to healthier food and smaller portions. Weight Watchers, launched in 1961, was among the earliest dieting systems to explicitly focus on portion control. These initial diets, in turn, led to the fad diets that have sprung up throughout the decades, from the low-fat craze of the 1990s to the low-carb Atkin's diet of the 2000s. Research spurred by these movements led to the discovery of the long-term health effects of artificial ingredients such as trans fats.

2000s

This trend toward reexamining American diets ultimately led to a more holistic approach to understanding the effect of food on people's lives. In the 21st century, there has been a larger push to eat locally, either by purchasing food from farmer's markets or eating at restaurants that source local food. Vegetarianism and veganism have become significantly more popular among Americans as people examine the links between factory animal agriculture and health, climate, and ethical issues. The rising interest in organic food and non-genetically modified food has led to heated debates in the public sphere about the processes that go into creating our food in the first place.

In many ways, Americans have access to more food than at any time in history. People can purchase a huge variety of fruits and vegetables at their grocery store regardless of season, and once unfamiliar cuisines such as Thai, Ethiopian, and Peruvian food have become not just available to more people than ever before but increasingly trendy and popular.

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According to the USDA, there were nearly 9,000 farmers markets serving American consumers in 2019.

Despite the abundance and variety of healthy foods, food insecurity and diseases linked to poor diets are persistent problems in the U.S. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, over 13 percent of households were considered food insecure in 2023.[11] These households had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. Not everyone has equal access to quality foods. The location of grocery stores can create "food deserts" where communities, especially low-income communities of color, lack access to the fresh, nutritious food that might be easily accessible to their wealthier neighbors.

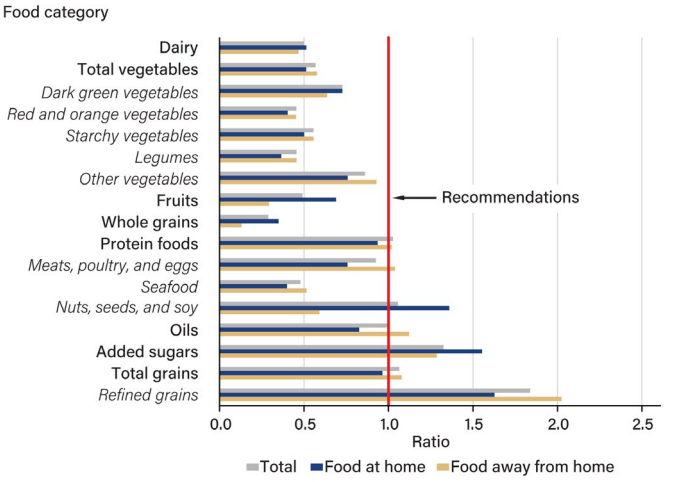
Diseases associated with diets high in sugar and processed foods have grown more common as well. In 2023, more than 40 percent of the American population was considered obese, representing a 10 percent increase since 2000.[12] Diabetes, a chronic and potentially life-threatening disease that often correlates with obesity, has grown during this time period as well; in 2023, more than 150 million Americans (more than one-third of the country's population) had diabetes or prediabetes.[13]

New treatments for obesity came into public awareness in 2021, when the FDA approved the first GLP-1 for obese patients. GLP-1s have rapidly become popular treatments in the U.S.: in 2025, over 12 percent of American adults took GLP-1 drugs.[14]

America's food habits take their toll on the environment, too. An estimated 30-40 percent of the country's food supply is wasted. Discarded food is the single largest category of material placed in municipal landfills.[15] Food production can stress water resources and fossil fuels used to transport food around the country and the globe, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Effectively reducing food waste and providing nourishment to America's underserved communities will require cooperation among stakeholders across the entire supply chain.

Dietary quality of U.S. consumers aged 2 and above by food category, 2017–18

USDA Economic Research Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Note: The **ratio** is the actual consumption densities calculated from comparing survey data to the Federal recommended densities for a diet of 2,000 calories. Density is the amount of food consumed per 1,000 calories.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, Agricultural Research Service and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2017–18 What We Eat in America, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Dietary benchmarks based on Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020–25.

Food Trends

Here are some statistics shaping teenagers today:

- Around half of U.S. teenagers eat fruit and vegetables daily, and only a quarter regularly eat breakfast.[16]
- Young people are cooking more of their own food: more than half of 8-to-18-year-olds say that they like to cook for themselves or their families. Social media is an increasingly popular source of recipes: 46% of young people have tried a recipe they've seen online.[17]
- Food delivery is an increasingly common source of meals, with 61% of families with children ordering delivery food at least once per week.[18]
- Food is the top expenditure for teen boys, who spend 23% of their money on food.[19]
- Energy drinks are teenagers' preferred source of energy, with 45% of teenagers choosing energy drinks over coffee and other caffeinated drinks.[20]

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