

Fast Food Pickle

by G. Murphy Donovan (November 2014)

“The best burger joint in the world is home.” – Calvin Trillin

The season of cheer is upon us again. Halloween and Thanksgiving, the most American of holidays, are the first and surely the best. For a day, Halloween allows us to be what we are not. Then Thanksgiving follows with a day of guilt free excess.

The turkey is the ironic symbol of the festive season, an ugly bird with cleavage. Unfortunately, genetically engineered breast meat will be served this year with cranberry and angst dressing.

America is beset by war, disease, global warming, and speculations about Bruce Jenner’s gender. A still more ominous national crisis is flying just below the radar. Fast food is under siege! Six staples of the American diet are in peril: the bagel, pizza, the cheeseburger, the hot dog, macaroni and cheese, and beer.

Predictably, the villains in these created crises are again the usual suspects, big brother and chain food restaurants. Their objectives are regime change, undermining traditional food values in the name culinary democracy. Some might say theocracy. There is also some anecdotal evidence that George Bush Jr., Vladimir Putin, or Abe *al Baghdadi* might be behind a host of nefarious culinary plots.



The Bagel

Bagels are an import, probably invented in some East European *shtetl*. Who would think of boiling a lump of dough and then baking it to the consistency of fine Corinthian leather? Never mind! The bagel is now an American institution, breakfast on the run for the harried cubicle denizen.

Cardiologists hate bagels and periodontists love them. Indeed, carbohydrates are a kind of sugar in a burka, but a good chew is like gym for your face. Here we speak to your facial anatomy, not the cheeks you sit on. Indeed, a bagel aficionado is known for buff cheeks and *brava* buttocks.

A good bagel should be a little bigger than a watch band yet smaller than an inner tube.

If you are religious, a salmon or cream cheese garnish on a bagel is permissible. Heathens have been known to blaspheme with butter. Oy! A good bagel does not require tolerance or ecumenism.

The threat to bagels comes from two quarters; inflation and onion deficits. Indeed, the size of bagels has doubled to compete with the lunch and sandwich trades. Meat and dairy combinations also have been introduced to bagel cleavage, thus corrupting the modest Ashkenazi icon.

Collateral damage includes the bialy, step-child to the bagel. A bialy is a depressed bagel with a diced onion center. Alas, while the canonical bagel is getting bigger, the bialy suffers from onion default. Gone are the days when your favorite squeeze might smell like lilacs and onions in the morning.

What's next, garlic free kimchee?

Pizza

Carbohydrates and cream cheese provide a seamless transition to the pizza crisis. Here again travesty comes in twos, human resources and perfidious ingredients.

The personnel problem mimics the General Motors model, parts manufactured by cheap labor abroad and assembled locally by teens and immigrants, wage captives who speak less English than the parts department. The food assembly line is often paid less too, if that's possible. Not a lot of incentive for quality there.

An authentic pizza is a study in simplicity: local dough, fresh tomato, honest cheese, a schmear of olive oil – and a spritz of parmesan and oregano as the pie comes out of the heat. In Denver and Portland, a rasher of cannabis is an acceptable oregano substitute. The citizens of Palermo, also, have a Papal dispensation for anchovies.

Alas, the average American chain pizza does not contain any fresh ingredients save the occasional precious body fluid shed by hostile employees. Other ingredients routinely come from cans, plastic bags, neglect, and indifference. The modern American pizza is a fusion of cheap labor and seamy ingredients.

And boutique pizza parlors might be worse than the chains. Specialty pizzas are often mistaken for *crepes*, if size is a marker. Confusion with anything French does nothing for Italian

reputation. A salon pizzeria is one of those business models that offer less for more, not unlike the Botox trade.

The authenticity of effete pizza is also suspect. Who puts pineapple or truffles on a tomato pie? Mushrooms, especially, on pizza are redundant. Any college sophomore knows that a generous slice, curated under a sofa bed for two days, produces fungi spontaneously. With boutique pizzerias, pretense is usually a euphemism for expense.

Burgers and Dogs

The hamburger and the hot dog, nee frankfurter, get to the heart of ironic America. The burger, aka Wimpy, contains no ham and the dog, in most cases, does not contain Shih Tzu or Cocker Spaniel. The hamburger is usually beef, or some facsimile, and the hot dog is beef too, although the Kaiser's original imperial frank was pork. Germans are very good with pigs and a host of tubular byproducts.



Alas, the pork dog is gone and most franks appear to be some variety of mystery meat. A rectangular vestige of the original frank might be found in a can of Spam. There was a time when a good hot dog was everyman's tube steak.

Cynics might call the Frankfurt sausage a 'Schlomo,' a left-handed tribute to psychoanalysis, an Austrian affectation. Still, Freudian links are a big part of hot dog legend.

The hamburger carries similar baggage. Jimmy Buffet assures us that there will be cheeseburgers in paradise. *Ins'allah!* Surely, sex would be redundant in any garden of eating.

Fortunately, there are no prophesies about "special sauces," a *nouvelle cuisine* affront to the culinary logic of cheese, caramelized ground beef, and cushy bread. Some ketchup or onion might be allowed, anything else is burger heresy.

Dog and burger joints suffer from the same personnel irregularities that plague pizza dives. It's not just the acne, attitudes, and amateurs. The noble waiter and sassy waitress have been replaced by servers, associates, and partners. Truly?

Anyone who goes to a fast food franchise for a "partner" might be suffering from a clinical confusion of appetites.

Mac and Cheese

You could say that cheese is the tie that binds American portable food. Indeed, after breast milk, American tykes are imprinted with noodles and cheddar. Sadly, baked macaroni and cheese, like so many other Yankee kitchen standards, has been corrupted by apostates.

Some retailers actually sell the ingredients in a single box; the “cheese” is powdered. Good grief! Other deviants dispense cheese from plastic squeeze bottles! Adding insult to injury, pasta Nazis now insist on elbow macaroni as the *de rigueur* noodle.

Good Mac & Cheese might be made with any shapely semolina, even the whole wheat mutant. Still, the cheese must be hand-grated from a tart chunk of real cheddar, preferably yellow, but white is allowed. A combination of the two is often the choice of the *bi-fromage* community.

A proper M&C sauce is made with evaporated milk, grated cheese, and a throw of paprika stirred counter clockwise, like polenta, with a rock maple spoon. Any clockwise motions will allow cheese curds to separate from the animal fat leaving you with an unsightly pan of cheese turds – whey and oil. Good dining is a product of ritual clarity.

Any red-blooded American parent who does not master the art of Mac & Cheese runs the risk of raising children who will never find their gastronomic G-Spot, midst the wilderness of their predictably petulant primary senses.

Beer

Beer, like cheese, is one of the essential food groups. You don't watch hockey with *Pomerol*, you don't watch basketball with *Pouilly Fuisse*, you don't watch baseball with *Fume Blanc*, and surely nobody watches American football with a glass Merlot. If you drink Merlot, you should be watching the *View* anyway. Sports are the exclusive domain of beer drinkers, preferably stout or dry ale.

Women who drink beer are kin to those who eat garlic and onions. Such ladies are not just irresistible, they're delicious too. A mate who smells like her plate is an excellent *aperitif* – or *digestif*.

Nietzsche characterized Germans as “beerish.” Most Teutonic tribes consider any adjectival variant of beer to be high praise indeed. Americans have a similar outlook.

Beer is the mother's milk of spectator sports; real sports, not soccer, tennis, golf, or go-carts. Any activity that excludes hands and team mates or might require an internal combustion engine could be a pastime, but never true sport.

NASCAR celebrates with champagne. Strawberries are served at tennis matches. Long Island iced tea is served on the 19th hole at Winged Foot. Hello!

Yet even with beer, American busybodies can never leave well enough alone. The corruption may have begun with mass production in St. Louis, but the final blow was low calorie, or “lite beer.” A lite beer makes about as much sense as an umbrella in the shower. Indeed, lite beer is a euphemism for expensive urine.

Beer and calories are indivisible. From whence comes middle aged ennui, the pot bellies of the American zeitgeist, without real beer?

Epilogue

The true villain in all of this is apathy – or a toxic addiction to television commercials or social networks, those dot.com fountains of youth. We may go to school, yet few return with educations. Few read or go to church anymore either. The default arbiter of modern culture is the flat screen, the laptop, or the smart phone – junk food for the mind. NSA, Nielsen, and retail propagandists rule these airways.

The crisis is real, not to be confused with recreational panics like global warming, acid reflux, or flatulence. The aim of food subversives is to erase the line between fast food and junk food.

Beyond our shores, fast or finger food has noble origins. Sushi, canapés, tapas, dim sum, haggis, and *zakuski* are examples. Junk food, in contrast, is a fusion of advertising, exploitation, greed, creepy clowns, and misguided entrepreneurship. Righteous finger food should never be confused with the corruptions of junk food.

Bagels, pizza, burgers, hot dogs, Mac & Cheese, and beer are part of what makes Columbia great – or zaftig anyway.

Wake up America! Tradition is the best refuge for patriots.

The author usually writes about the politics of national security where food seldom appears on the menu.

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