

# An Impromptu History of Ethnic Restaurants

by  
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Ethnic restaurants are generally seen as places where people from cultures outside the U.S. provide meals similar to what they are in their original homelands. We're all familiar with them; we all love them. They abound all across the country; Italian, Mexican, and Chinese restaurants being the most popular and the most common out of a truly dazzling array of international offerings.

I was hoping to include here a history of ethnic restaurants in America, perhaps even pinpointing the origins of such back to the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Alas, no history...no pinpointing. Couldn't find a thing on Google. So, we'll just try to reason out what we can...

Although technically not a distinct culture in and of itself yet, let's go all the way back to the Thirteen Colonies. They certainly belonged to, and were run by, Britain. But, there was already a rich mix mixture of ethnic groups to be found there. Europe had gone through a horrendous series of religious wars (Protestants vs. Catholics, Protestants vs. Protestants) in



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the 1600s, causing large numbers of people to look for greener pastures, most notably German Lutherans, French Huguenots, and English Puritans...but you can also throw in some Scottish Presbyterians, Irish Catholics, German and Swiss Calvinists, and who knows what else.

Were there 'restaurants,' as such, in the Thirteen Colonies? Well, there were certainly inns that would qualify, and one has to assume that inns run, say, by German, French, Swiss, etc. proprietors would be serving the cuisine they were most familiar with...i.e., their own cultural dishes. Hence, ethnic restaurants!

Europeans from many lands poured into America in the 1700s and especially the 1800s. Famines ravaged Prussia, France, Ireland and Eastern Europe in the 18th century (Prussia lost 41% of its population from 1708-1711!). There were more famines in the nineteenth century (the Irish famine of 1845-1852 caused 1.5-2 million to immigrate alone), but it was revolutions, especially, that swept across Europe in the 1800s, as nation after nation attempted to rid itself of absolute rulers (most of these failed).

At the same time, the 1800s was also the period of great American expansion. Napoleon sold us the Louisiana Territory in 1803, which brought a more definite French cuisine within U.S. borders and eventually even produced a brand new ethnic menu...Cajun.

A result of the U.S. continuing to push to the Pacific (Texas, 1845; California, 1850; Arizona Territory, 1863) was a lengthy border with Mexico. Not surprisingly, Mexican cooking began to infiltrate the Western states and territories.

The combination of the 1849 gold strike in California and the building of the transcontinental railroad (1869) resulted in an influx of Chinese and Japanese in the West. More ethnic menus appeared.

Also, beginning in the 1850s, the first significant numbers of Jewish immigrants began. In 1840, American Jews had numbered 15,000. By 1880, the number had jumped to 250,000. By 1920, one-third of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe had immigrated to America. The 1930s, of course, saw a second wave of Jewish immigrants, primarily from Germany.

Between 1880 and 1914, at least 7.5 million Eastern Europeans migrated to the U.S. (Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, etc.), many having been displaced by land redistribution efforts employed after the abolition of serfdom across that portion of Europe.

Although some Russian had already settled in the U.S. in the latter 1800s, the Russian Revolution of 1917 caused a significant number to immigrate to America, as well, settling on both coasts.

World Wars I and II brought in further European



refugees, but the Vietnam War was different in that it resulted in a huge number of Asian immigrants (Thais, Cambodians, Vietnamese), and in a few cases entire Southeast Asian cultures were transplanted to the United States (i.e., the Hmong). Pretty soon, there were various Southeast Asian restaurants springing up around the country.

Well, you get the idea. Throw in all the rest (Greeks, Indians, Pakistanis, Middle Eastern and North African cultures, etc.), and you get the picture of ethnic restaurants in the U.S. Any Restaurant collector can attest to the wide variety of Ethnic Restaurant covers to be had. In 2000, James Mettler, WA, had 14,358 Chinese Restaurants alone! Not surprising, perhaps, when you consider that Restaurants, in and of themselves, constitute the largest category.

It might be interesting to put together a collection of one restaurant cover from each ethnic group and see just how many cultures you can come up with.....Wouldn't be a bad idea for a display entry, either!

In fact, there are a lot of ways in which you can be creative with such covers. How about 'culture-combinations,' for example? — Polish-American, French-Moroccan, German-Scandinavian, Chinese-Polynesian, etc.

Even within a given ethnic category, there may be further sub-divisions that provide fodder for collecting creativity. Just look at Chinese Restaurants! There is Szechuan; there is Mandarin; there is Cantonese; and so forth.

Ethnic Restaurants is an area that adds [*dare I say*] a little more flavor to the Restaurant-collecting experience...and much more in the way of interest opportunities.

