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HON499 projects. 39.

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American as Apple Pie:
Cultural Significance of American Baked Goods

Madeline Jupina

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Introduction

What does the phrase “American as apple pie” mean, really? How did apple pie become synonymous with Americana, the same way bagels became a symbol of the New York Jewish deli and funnel cakes associated with hot summer nights at the state fair? The culture behind food, especially baked goods, is often overlooked—but really, food is culture. Food tastes evolve over time, a product of the same slow and constant changes that evolve a culture: changes in values, new arrivals, status markers, and abundance or scarcity. These same cultural components shape what comes and goes, what stays, and what becomes so iconic that it becomes an American symbol (Visser, 1999). I have chosen four baked goods in particular: apple pie; Yum-Yum Cake, also known as Depression Cake; beignets; and bagels for their various intersections in American culture. How did apple pie become synonymous with what it means to live a distinctly American life, especially when the dessert itself is not originally American? How does it represent the good times in America, while Yum-Yum cake, one of my family’s own recipes, represents one of the most difficult periods in American history? Beignets and bagels both began as regional foods associated with certain racial and ethnic groups, but have since diverged onto very different paths toward the mainstream. These four baked goods form part, albeit a small one, of the tapestry of American food culture. They are representative of how it has been influenced by immigration and cultural diffusion, wealth and scarcity.

The cultural influences of and on food are sometimes overlooked because they are commonplace. However, food is one way in which some historians humanize history. At New York City’s Tenement Museum, tour guides and historians use food to further illustrate the richness and variety of immigrant cultures that have made home there over the years (Steinberg, 2012). The “Great American Melting Pot,” itself a food-related reference, is full of the culinary

traditions of immigrants. Some of them have become fully mainstream, while others have remained popular only among specific ethnic groups, and everything in between. In his television show *Somebody Feed Phil*, a travel food show and one of the inspirations behind this project, Phil Rosenthal meets a man who owns a bagel shop. Although bagels are ubiquitous in America and many other countries, eaten by people of all creeds and colors, Rosenthal still makes a reference to their roots, stating that the owner of the shop is, surprisingly, Italian and not Jewish (Rosenthal, 2020). Even as bagels have become so mainstream, so many people still feel culturally tied to them. This is one simple anecdote, but its theme is universal. Apple pie, Yum-Yum Cake, beignets, and bagels come from a variety of cultural traditions, moments in history, and baking techniques. Some have evolved to the point that their roots are hardly recognizable, and some are deeply traditional. Some have near-international staying power, and some do not. Although they are just four simple dishes, they are testaments to groups and moments in American history.

How Apple Pie Became American

Centuries before apple pie became the symbol for Americana that it is today, the apple had a tough time in Western culture. Although the apple specifically does not appear in the Old Testament of the Bible, with the first couple eating only an unspecified forbidden fruit, the apple's connection to evil is millennia in the making (Rupp, 2014). Some suggest that the demonization of the apple in Western culture comes from linguistics—“malus” means both “evil” and “apple” in Latin (House, 2014). While not every notable religious work positions the apple as the forbidden fruit—Michelangelo painted a fig tree, a traditionally Judaic interpretation, in his portrayal of Adam and Eve in the Sistine Chapel—the symbolism of the apple as the forbidden fruit is inextricably linked with Western culture (Brown, 2018). *Paradise*

Lost, for example, explicitly refers to the apple twice (Martyris, 2017). The apple's negative symbolism in Christianity is well-documented, but lesser known is its damaged legacy in American folklore.

Johnny Appleseed, subject of many an elementary school play, has been watered down through the generations. In the original cultural context, he distributed the seeds of sour wild apples across the country—apples that were perfect for making alcoholic cider and “applejack” (Rupp, 2014). Although Johnny Appleseed has been far removed from his historical context in modern day, environmental journalism professor Michael Pollan calls him “our American Dionysus” (Crockett, 2015). In fact, Johnny Appleseed became so notorious for this that the temperance movement also adopted the apple as a symbol of immorality and drunkenness (Rupp, 2014). However negative its past portrayals, the apple is one of the best-loved fruits in the United States, making up 29% of American kids' daily fruit intake as of 2015 (Kaplan, 2015). The United States is also the second largest apple producer, following only China, and grows 2,500 varieties (World Atlas, 2021). Just as the apple itself has taken a twisted path through Western culture to become so well-loved, apple pie, the ever-American symbol, did not start out so American after all.

Apple pies and tarts are incredibly old baked goods; the first evidence of a recipe for apple pie is from an English cookbook published in 1381 (Crockett, 2015). The recipe is titled “For to make Tartys in Applis.” Apple pie's roots are in England, although the crust was added by Dutch bakers at the beginning of the fifteenth century, long after the concept of the apple tart originated (Crockett, 2015). The sweet, or at least sweeter, apples used in apple pie are nonnative to North America and arrived via sea trade routes from Europe. The only apple variety that originated on American soil is the crabapple, Latin name *malus*, also known as the apple

associated with evil everywhere from ancient Latin studies to Johnny Appleseed and his hard cider (Crockett, 2015). Apple pie arrived in the Northeastern United States primarily with British and Dutch settlers, and Pennsylvania Dutch women quickly adopted it as a regional dessert. Not long after, “in the vein of many things American, settlers then proceeded to declare the apple pie ‘uniquely American,’ often failing to acknowledge its roots” (Crockett, 2015). Since apple pie’s adoption as the delicacy of the New World, its existence in American culture has been surprisingly rife with controversy. However, this controversy also gave it its staying power.

By the beginning of the 1900s, apple pie was far and away the most popular American pie. However, it was not popular with everyone. In a culture war over pie’s very existence, American culinary traditionalists defended pie, specifically apple pie, as an American necessity, calling it “an article of necessity in every household as much as the bed and the cook stove” (Petrick, 2019). Culinary reformers, who deemed pie unhealthy both physically and spiritually, called it an “unmoral food,” stating that “no great man was ever fond of pie” (Petrick, 2019). Culinary reformers associated pie with the heavy foods of the old world, so much so that they associated pie-eating negatively with immigrants. The same temperance advocates that made Johnny Appleseed’s crabapples a symbol for immorality even blamed pie-eating for divorce, saying it was as much of a cause for marital strife as alcoholism. (Petrick, 2019). However, for pie-lovers and traditionalists, apple pie was everything good about America—it was the prosperity that allowed one to eat sweets and the inalienable right to do just that. The phrase “American as apple pie” itself comes from an advertisement out of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for men’s suits that bucked stuffy British fashion standards (Eschner, 2017). No matter the fight that culinary reformers put up, the start of World War I permanently launched apple pie to the forefront of American folklore, with the *Boston Daily Globe* writing that apple pie was the

number one taste of home for American soldiers (Petrick, 2019). By World War II, American soldiers were telling journalists that they were fighting for “mom and apple pie” (Eschner, 2017). Both World Wars, as international conflict often does, cemented what it meant to be an American patriot. To many soldiers, politicians, and journalists alike, it meant the right to eat apple pie unrestricted. Apple pie, over a century since the start of WWI, is still squarely in the forefront of American tastes.

As World War II began on a global scale, America experienced another national food phenomenon: frozen foods. During WWII, tin shortages resulted in canned good shortages, so Americans’ long-lasting vegetable of choice became frozen vegetables, rather than canned (Nix, 2019). From the popularization of frozen vegetables, frozen food took the nation by storm and was a fixture of every suburban home by the 1950s (Nix, 2019). Following the frozen foods trend, the first patent for frozen pie crust was granted in 1955. This sequence, the pie-related patriotism of World War I and World War II, followed by the popularization of frozen desserts, brought frozen apple pie firmly into the forefront of suburban tastes. The pro-pie advocates of the early 1900s argued, at its most basic, for their unalienable American right to eat as much apple pie as they pleased. Through both World Wars, soldiers and the journalists who interviewed them positioned apple pie as the flavor of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Finally, in the golden age of the suburbs that was the 1950s, apple pie, and its lower-commitment frozen counterparts, became a staple of Americana and closely associated with the suburban American experience.

Apple pie has massive staying power in America. A Google search of “apple pie recipe” yields 220 million results. For comparison, the other wildly popular American desserts of chocolate chip cookies and cheesecake yield only 128 million and 210 million, respectively. List

after list of most popular American desserts puts apple pie in the top ten. Its prominence is about so much more than just its flavors, however. Apple pie is also nostalgic for many Americans. It is a symbol of the “good old days,” the dessert that soldiers overseas tell their families they miss the most, the taste of Thanksgiving and of fall in Pennsylvania. However, apple pie as a symbol of patriotism has also been misconstrued throughout the generations, as have many American symbols. While turn-of-the-century culinary reformers associated pie with the poorer and immigrant classes, and while in some cases it has been used as a symbol of jingoistic American patriotism, apple pie itself is an immigrant (Zghelb, 2018).

In this nation of immigrants, even something as American as apple pie itself has an immigration story. While the only apples native to North America are bitter, global trade brought ones sweet enough to bake with. Wheat flour, as well, is nonnative to North America (Zghelb, 2018). While the indigenous populations of North America subsisted on corn before colonization, Spaniards brought wheat to modern-day Mexico, creating the American diet as we know it (Kansas Wheat, 2014). Even the most assimilated American dishes represent a rich history of trade and immigration. It is crucial to note that this diet is, in the case of virtually all agricultural products that are nonnative to North America, borne from the violence of colonization and the erasure of entire indigenous cultures. Even as one celebrates the globalization that has made this and all the baked goods featured in this project possible, remember that many other equally rich cultures were sacrificed to that cause. Apple pie itself is not a native North American dish, no matter how well it has since fit into the culture. Rather, it came to what is now the United States with German and British settlers who were not only assimilating but working to create an entirely new culture in colonial America. Although the

phrase “American as apple pie” is still widely known, apple pie itself went through assimilation into American culture.

How Depression-era Foods Came Full-Circle

The eras of and following both the Great Depression and the COVID-19 pandemic have much in common politically and economically, but the similarities do not end there. Culinary trends from Great Depression-era scarcity also reappeared over the course of the past year, as people faced similar hardships, food shortages, and opportunities for ingenuity. The COVID-19 pandemic saw ingredient shortages that dishes like Yum-Yum Cake were specifically designed to address (Mull, 2020). As *Time* points out, the infamous flour shortage at the beginning of the pandemic has been a familiar theme throughout American history, albeit with different ingredients at different times (Rude, 2020). Yum-Yum Cake is not only representative of the moment in American history that is the Great Depression, but of the repeating themes of hardship and ingenuity that make up so many American stories.

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic crisis, but it began in the United States in 1929 with the stock market crash on Black Thursday (Pells & Romer, 2020). The crash reduced American spending, known as aggregate demand, and less spending in turn hurt manufacturers, hurting businesses, hurting international trade, until virtually the entire world fell into depression (Pells & Romer, 2020). The human impacts were varied. During the Great Depression and several other economic downturns since then, mortality rates decreased, with only the exception of death by suicide (Tapia Granados & Diez Roux, 2009). Research has shown repeatedly that economic downturns do not result in increased death rates, at least in the United States. Although people were hungry, starvation does not move to the forefront as a cause of death during the Great Depression. That does not mean, however, that there was no scarcity.

Quality of life in the United States drastically decreased during the Great Depression, even though it was a comparatively developed country to some of the others that suffered during this economic downturn. Around a quarter of the American workforce was unable to find work from 1929 to 1933 (Pells & Romer, 2020). Cities saw breadlines that stretched around blocks, and although starvation deaths were not significant, food became extremely scarce and expensive, especially the more sought-after ingredients that are missing from Yum-Yum Cake. Food insecurity reached levels that conjure up images not only of the economic effects of COVID-19, but also the political climate.

The scarcity of the Great Depression and the scarcity of the COVID-19 pandemic have striking similarities. In the 1930s, farmers were encouraged by the government to destroy excess crop supply in hopes of driving up the prices of what was left (Haynes, 2020). In 2020, crops ready to harvest sat rotting in fields as farmers lacked the international workers they often employ during the busiest seasons (Haynes, 2020). In both cases, people have gone hungry and become food insecure in the midst of mass food destruction. In another haunting parallel, Hoover, in the worst moments of the Great Depression, told reporters that “no one is actually starving” because he met a “hobo” who managed to beg enough to receive ten meals in one day (Smith & Walch, 2004). Today, that statement is uncannily similar to the comments of former President Trump, who left Walter Reed hospital after rounds of intense steroid therapy for COVID-19 only to declare that people should not fear the virus (Haltiwanger, 2020). In both cases the leadership denied the severity of what the American people were going through, leaving them to resort to their own solutions. Amidst some of the worst national and international crises the world has ever seen, Americans were forced to continue to go about their daily lives—

surviving, feeding families, and staying afloat—resulting in many culinary parallels between the Great Depression and today.

Because Depression-era recipes like Yum-Yum Cake come out of periods of scarcity and ingenuity, it makes sense for them to reappear in similar economic situations throughout history. At the height of the previous economic crisis, the 2009 recession, news outlets began interviewing senior citizens who lived through the Great Depression as children. They talk about the importance of focusing on home cooking and making do with what they had in their cupboards—themes that unify the Great Depression, the 2009 recession, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Macvean, 2008). Many of the “make do” meals of the Great Depression were the result not of lack of food, but of abundance of some ingredients and scarcity of others. This is where Depression-era meals like “mix ‘n’ match” soup come from, as well as Yum-Yum Cake (Macvean, 2008). Yum-Yum Cake, my Great-Great Grandmother’s recipe, is a spice cake with raisins, but made without butter, milk, or eggs. The base of it is vegetable shortening and water, and it is seasoned with cinnamon. By the standards of my own childhood, during which my own Grandmom made it because she considers it a piece of family history, it is not particularly delicious. Although one can tell that it lacks some crucial ingredients, American families did not give up their drive to enjoy sweets whenever possible just because of ingredient shortages. With today’s food shortages, some people are again revisiting the idea of Depression cakes, or whacky cake, as it is often called.

Whacky cake is slightly different from my family’s recipe for Yum-Yum Cake. In fact, I have not seen in my research any other recipe for a spice cake with so few ingredients; Yum-Yum Cake only has six. Whether that itself is a testament to ingenuity in times of scarcity, or simply a taste preference of my Great-Great Grandmother, I cannot know. However, depression

cakes, mostly made with cocoa powder, made a huge comeback in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Koenig, 2020). This time, ingredient scarcity was not a matter of life or death, but inconvenience in a time when having a hobby was everything. Although baking breads and cakes to keep food on the table is no longer necessary in 2020, it is worth noting that throughout the pandemic ingredients have not only been scarce on the grocery store shelves, but in some people's lives. The coronavirus pandemic saw food insecurity levels in America that are only matched by the Great Depression (Patel, 2020). While nonperishables like flour and yeast were often missing from the shelves over the course of the pandemic (Mull, 2020), cutting back on pricier ingredients with a shorter shelf life, like dairy and meat products, is still a money-saving strategy for people experiencing food insecurity today. Although ingredient scarcity has always sparked culinary ingenuity, with Americans attempting to make bland dishes exciting and still get their sweets in where they can, Depression-era food science contrasted this attitude. Food science, a relatively new discipline at the time, advocated for eating only the foods that ensured sufficient health and nutrient levels, forfeiting much of the enjoyment.

Yum-Yum Cake, although it is a family recipe that I hold dear, is missing virtually all the ingredients that make a cake truly delicious. However, this was common during the Depression not only out of necessity, but also out of American sensibilities surrounding food at the time. The 1920s saw the first years in American history that people cared about what was in their food—not ingredients, but rather vitamins, minerals, and anything else that was a benefit or detriment to their health (Ziegelman & Coe, 2017). Part of the earliest era of nutrition research in the United States was the discovery that Americans were typically eating more than necessary—and the subsequent decision that eating less would be optimal (Ziegelman & Coe, 2017). This

discovery aligned perfectly with American tradition and history. America generally prides itself on Protestant ethics and austerity. Although there are many, many ideologies at play in the modern United States, some of the Protestant and even Puritanical principles it was founded on still very much apply. Many branches of Protestantism encourage preparing the soul for the afterlife through hard work and self-discipline, ascetism, and overcoming obstacles (Buchholz, 1983). This tradition still shines through today in disdain for “handouts” and a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” attitude. While this attitude has been alive and well in the United States for centuries, it combined with the nutrition research of the time, which argued that Americans could and should eat less, to create the perfect social context for a time in which there really was less to eat in the United States.

America faced food shortages in the years between the two World Wars for a number of reasons. Between humanitarian efforts to feed Europe during World War I and government-mandated destruction of crops and livestock, encouraging Americans to eat the least amount of food with the most amount of nutrients was politically sound, especially according to the Hoover administration (Ziegelman & Coe, 2017). In fact, the World War I era is the first time that “Wheatless, Eggless, Butterless, Milkless, Sugarless Cake” appears in the United States, encouraged as an alternative by the federal government (Ziegelman & Coe, 2017, pp. 29). Post-Hoover administration, Eleanor Roosevelt was also a strong champion of an austere diet that worked solely to provide the vitamins and nutrients necessary to human functioning (Chandler, 2016). While the era of World War I through the Great Depression saw a shift toward food as utilitarian rather than enjoyable, this attitude is in stark contrast to some of the strongest advocates for apple pie as the national dish.

Yum-Yum Cake and apple pie have had obviously different journeys through American culture and history. They are even seemingly unrelated. However, they are symbolic of two very different attitudes and experiences in American history. Apple pie is nonnative to the United States—even North America. However, it quickly assimilated as it was taken on as a national dish by immigrants only a few generations removed from their home countries in Europe. Yum-Yum Cake, on the other hand, is borne from a uniquely American experience. Although the Great Depression touched virtually every part of the world, it profoundly changed the very meaning American daily life, both culinary and otherwise. While apple pie is a decadent treat, Yum-Yum Cake comes from a moment in history in which all that mattered was getting highly sought-after vitamins and nutrients from food. In fact, the 113 million Google search results that “healthy apple pie recipe” yields would not exist without the nutritional mindset that brought recipes like Yum-Yum Cake into being. The two recipes differ not only in the culinary mindset behind them, but also the cultural one.

Why did culinary reformers and traditionalists fight so hard over pie-eating at the turn of the century? Why, even in the teeth of the worst economic crisis in history, did American families edit their dessert recipes in order to keep eating them? The answer, I believe, lies in patriotism. In fact, an American newspaper at the turn of the century asserted about immigrants that “his Americanism, in fact, may be tested in his taste for pie” (Petrick, 2019). This is an arbitrary, and in fact even xenophobic, assertion, but comments like this were far from uncommon around the turn of the century. American foodies who were told by reformers to reduce their pie intake were aghast because, in part, of the belief that what is great about America is its freedoms. America was the land of plenty, or at least perceived to be, and in the land of plenty one could eat all the pie they wanted. This runs in stark contrast to the cultural

situation around Yum-Yum Cake, and in fact the sentiment that America is the land of plenty may have made the situation worse. When Hoover asserted that people were not actually going hungry during the Great Depression, he was blatantly ignoring the direst circumstances in the history of the nation. Today, in the midst of the greatest crisis since the Great Depression, politicians again have downplayed its severity in order to hold America up as a nation that cannot be defeated. The reality is, however, that this attitude of America as the land of decadent sweets, to be eaten whenever one pleases, often creates worse situations in times of scarcity. Even as Americans scraped together recipes out of scraps, people recited lines about America as a land of plenty and opportunity, blinded to the realities happening all around them. In this way, apple pie represents an American ideal, and Yum-Yum Cake, and oft-ignored reality.

The Beignet: A Donut and a Cultural Reference Point

New Orleanian cuisine is world-famous. Not only does the mix of Caribbean, French, African, and Spanish flavors draw international foodies to New Orleans, but some New Orleanian fare is so popular that it is available internationally. Tourists and locals alike can enjoy traditional Cajun food at NOLA in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Google results for Cajun restaurants pop up for Canada, Spain, Japan, and more (Rosenthal, 2018). The fare that makes New Orleans world famous is typically either Cajun or Creole, two similar but distinct styles of cuisine and cultures. Creole food and culture are urban, originating in New Orleans itself. The word comes from *criollo*, Spanish for native, or a Portuguese term for “born on the continent,” depending on the source (Southern Living, 2018; Gerdes, 2012). It refers to French people born in New Orleans, who then quickly intermixed with African and Spanish people living there as well (Gerdes, 2012). Although Creole people began with French settlers, Creole identity today is synonymous with racially or ethnically mixed heritage. Although Creole and Cajun cultures have

blended throughout the generations, the original Creole New Orleanians were upper class, so their cooking was more labor intensive and had a larger variety of ingredients (Ducote, 2021). Cajun, on the other hand, is rural, descending from a population of French settlers from the Acadian region of France (Southern Living, 2018). Cajun food has a stronger bayou influence and is therefore simpler, although it is heavily seasoned with a huge emphasis on use of spices (Ducote, 2021). Against the bold flavors and spices in entrees such as red beans and rice, gumbo, jambalaya, and crawfish, beignets may seem simple, even plain. However, they have a storied cultural history of their own, and are just as much a part of New Orleanian fare as any other famous dish.

The history, culture, and cuisine in New Orleans are famous for their uniqueness, and they are unique because they are informed by a mix of cultures unlike anywhere else in America. The city has been, practically since its advent, a mix of Spanish and French colonists, African slaves, and refugees from the Caribbean; Irish, Italian, and German immigrants arrived later (Fussell, 2007). The racial and ethnic diversity was, and still is, striking in New Orleans, with a visitor in 1816 commenting that they had never seen such diversity of race, language, or custom in one place (Campanella, 2007). Creole culture had more freedom to become ethnically ambiguous for a variety of reasons. French- and Spanish-ruled colonies had looser racial requirements than those of the English, allowing for slightly more racial ambiguity and even accepting free people of color (Wills, 2019). Because of that, racial categories and constructions were very unique in New Orleans. Post-emancipation, the city developed an even larger mixed-race population, creating a strict hierarchy with fully white residents at the top, freed slaves at the bottom and Creoles of color in between (Campanella, 2007). While free people of color were, both before and after the emancipation of slavery, legally equal to whites, there were strong

social distinctions among lighter and darker skin tones, creating a de facto hierarchy (Wills, 2019). Although this was centuries ago, racial hierarchy continues to inform New Orleanian culture today, sometimes resulting in tragedy.

In Hurricane Katrina, majority-Black neighborhoods were devastated. The Black population of New Orleans made up 65% of flood victims and 66% of storm deaths (Fussell, 2007). I chose to write about beignets partially because I have family in New Orleans. Even years after Hurricane Katrina, there are clear economic and racial divisions in the devastation. Poorer neighborhoods, especially well-known Lower Ninth Ward, saw disproportionate deaths and property destruction from which the city is still recovering. This is in a city which has greatly benefitted from the culinary, cultural, and musical traditions of African American communities, but still pushes them into low-lying and impoverished communities that suffer the worst during floods. Beignets are typically associated with the French Catholic tradition, such that race does not always come to mind. However, the city of New Orleans, to which beignets are a quintessential piece, is closely tied with its racial history. Everything in New Orleans is marked by the diversity of races and cultures there, including beignets and the Catholic celebration with which they are associated: Mardi Gras.

Traditional beignets have their roots in the iconic French choux pastry. This pastry is incredibly light and fluffy, enough to rise with only the help of steam, foregoing other raising agents like yeast or baking powder (Loyacona, 2021). The recipe I chose was made with yeast and more similar to a traditional doughnut dough, as are many of the recipes easily found on the Internet. Since choux pastry often requires cooking on a stovetop, piping onto a tray, and then baking, using a traditional yeasted dough is more familiar to many people, myself included. Yeasted dough is so much more popular as the method for homemade beignets, in fact, that

finding a recipe for beignets made with choux pastry requires specifying this. The French group that brought beignets to Louisiana with them were the Acadians, a group of French migrants that settled in rural Louisiana and eventually came to be known as the Cajuns (Loyacona, 2021).

Although many Cajun foods, like red beans and rice and gumbo, have more Afro-Caribbean and African influences, beignets are virtually the same as they were when they first arrived in Louisiana with the Acadian settlers. Although the Cajun ethnic group is made up of Spanish, Irish, African, Native American, and Caribbean peoples in Louisiana, beignets remained very much in their traditional French form, and still do today (Brasseaux, 1992). In the typical New Orleanian tradition, Mardi Gras, French for Fat Tuesday, is also a French festival that has influenced and been influenced by other cultural traditions, making it the biggest and most festive week of the year in New Orleans.

Mardi Gras, both Fat Tuesday itself and the celebrations leading up to it, are times to indulge on a number of sweets, namely beignets. Beignets are one of the many sweets eaten during Mardi Gras celebrations, which take place just before the stoicism of the Lenten season (Hilliard, 2014). These celebrations are a crucial part of what makes New Orleanian culture distinct from so much of the rest of the country. Although the origins of Mardi Gras galas come from wealthy French settlers in Louisiana, one of the best-known modern traditions is African. Mardi Gras Indians, which are responsible for much of the visual spectacle of Mardi Gras parades, have a distinctly non-European history (Kessler, 2020). In the 1700s, escaped slaves were sometimes taken in by local indigenous groups and protected from slavecatchers. The culture of the local Native American groups, although completely its own, was similar to that of the West African former slaves in its style of dress and adornment. Indigenous and West African groups both use feathers, beading, bright colors, and headdresses, especially during celebrations

(Craig, 2017). In this way, Mardi Gras Indians are an exemplary illustration of how cultures and traditions mesh and influence one another throughout the centuries.

Mardi Gras is a world-famous festival that makes up a huge portion of New Orleanian culture, so it is relatively easy to see why it is so significant. Beignets, however, are just a dessert, so what is their significance to New Orleanian and American culture after all? Café du Monde is the most famous beignet seller in New Orleans, possibly the country. True to the New Orleanian Catholic tradition, it is open 24/7, closing only for Christmas and hurricanes (Café du Monde, 2020). Again demonstrating the vast cultural influences in New Orleans, the café opened just as coffee, newly imported from Latin American countries, was becoming wildly popular in the port city of New Orleans (Mariano, 2019). In this way, the culture surrounding beignets in New Orleans represents so much more. It has always been a city of diversity and represents not only the melting pot but the distinctiveness of each culture there. Settled and named by the French, New Orleans still boasts French culture in a myriad of ways, the beignet being one of them. As French settlers intermixed with other local peoples, they evolved and became Cajun and Creole. Their traditions, like Mardi Gras, gumbo, and so much more, mixed too, creating a culture distinct to the local ethnic groups. Although the culture in New Orleans was and still is strikingly diverse and distinct, New Orleanians themselves are often traditionalists, adhering closely to what makes their culture unique.

Part of the excitement of visiting New Orleans is its distinctiveness. Although I have never been to a Mardi Gras celebration, fanfare is all around in New Orleans. The Second Line is another parade tradition, in which, after a wedding or funeral, the attendees will march around town with a brass band, inviting others into their celebration. The culture is also close-knit and family-oriented, with locals greeting each other by asking “how’s your mom’n’em?” This unique

greeting dates back to a time when public officials in New Orleans skirted around residency requirements when running for office as long as “mom’n’em,” lived in the district they wanted to serve in (Falany, 2012). “Mom’n’em” was really any living relative in their large extended families. However, tradition lives on in New Orleans, and people still use that greeting with one another. Although beignets are a menu item in restaurants around the country, they are still so distinctive to the culture of New Orleans because of tradition. Even Café du Monde has only changed its menu one time, in 1988 when they added iced coffee and soft drinks (Café du Monde, 2020). They also remain firmly planted in tradition because of their connection with Fat Tuesday and the culture surrounding Mardi Gras. Although they can be eaten 24/7 in New Orleans, they have a special spot in the cultural calendar as well. For all the diversity and uniqueness in New Orleans, the people there hold fast to the traditions that make their city their own. Although all foods start with a cultural group, some become far more widespread and mainstream than others. When a dish has cultural roots as deep as beignets, it may become popular, but it will always remain a fixture in the tradition from which it originated.

The Bagel: A Symbol of Jewish New York

Long before the bagel became an American classic, it was a Jewish American cultural fixture, mostly unknown to the majority of Americans (Fiegl, 2008). However, the history of the bagel does not start there. Jewish peoples have faced centuries of persecution, and the bagel has followed them throughout, becoming a symbol of their struggle with and perseverance through poverty and persecution. The bagel’s close cultural ties with Jewish people, however, begin long before the Jewish deli. The first Jewish people to make bagels were German Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to Poland in the fourteenth century (Weinzweig, 2009). Even in this new country, they faced religious persecution and discrimination which ultimately led to the advent of

the bagel. In the earlier years, Jewish people living in heavily Catholic Poland were banned from baking bread. The Church viewed Judaism as the enemy to their own religion, and because bread was so closely related with Jesus and the sacrament, Polish religious leaders felt that Jewish people should not be able to partake in baking, especially commercially (Weinzweig, 2009). Even as the Polish government became more tolerant of the Jewish populations living there, Polish Church leaders were still extremely hesitant and implied that Jewish-baked bread could be poisonous to Christians (Weinzweig, 2009). To reassure their Christian customers, Jewish vendors at the time took to boiling their bread to ensure it was “clean,” and the iconic bagel crust and texture was born (Fox, 2021). Boiling bread was not completely unfamiliar to these Jewish bakers, however, as many of them had German ancestry and were very familiar with boiling dough to make pretzels as well. For Jewish people living in Poland and, centuries later, Jewish immigrants living in the Lower East Side in New York, boiled bread had other benefits. Boiling bagels keeps them fresher for longer. Jewish populations in a variety of countries have often been met with persecution and discrimination that, as a result, pushed them into poverty (Weinzweig, 2009). The technique of boiling bagels gave them the longer shelf life that was often crucial for poor Jewish people throughout history.

The city of New York has been synonymous with Jewish peoples and cultures since the very beginning. The first Jewish settlers to modern day America arrived in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam long before it became known as New York (Peck, 2021). Although many parts of New York are synonymous with Jewish culture today, New Amsterdam at one point had literally one Jewish resident (Oppenheim, 1925). This man, Jacob Barsimon, is widely recognized in Jewish historical writings as the first Jewish resident of New York. Although he was welcomed into the Dutch colony because of his relationship with the Dutch West India

Company, leaders in New Amsterdam became uncomfortable when a boat of 23 Jewish migrants was rerouted and arrived there not long after Barsimon did (Oppenheim, 1925). From virtually the beginning, Jewish migrants to modern day New York faced discrimination, as in many other parts of the world. These 23 Jewish arrivals were escaping the Portuguese occupation of Brazil, which they had initially fled to because of persecution in Portugal itself (Oppenheim, 1925). They were bound for Holland when pirates diverted their ship and they arrived in New Amsterdam. Although the leadership in New Amsterdam protested, the 23 were eventually let into the colony, where they faced further discrimination like restrictions on trade and a prohibition on owning private property (Peck, 2021). They did, however, establish the first synagogue in New York, starting the long and intertwined history of Jewish Americans and New York.

In the early years, Jewish New York was concentrated in the Lower East Side, and much of its cultural history still exists there. Jewish immigrants who arrived in New York faced much of the same poverty and dangerous conditions that they did in Poland and other Eastern European nations. In the span of around fifty years, from 1880 to 1924, 2.5 million Ashkenazi Jews, or Jewish immigrants from Eastern European nations, arrived in the United States, and around 75% of those two-and-a-half million remained in the Lower East Side (Price, 2014). In these years, many recent Jewish arrivals lived without plumbing or heat, and the Lower East Side saw half of New York City's fire deaths (Price, 2014). Jewish commerce, selling bagels and more, flourished partly because their establishments ran on the schedule approved by Judaism, meaning they were open on the Christian holy day of Sunday, when nearly everything else in the city was closed (Price, 2014). Several Lower East Side bagel institutions opened during the immigrant waves of the early 1900's, including Russ & Daughters. Part of the reason I chose to

focus on bagels and examine Jewish American culture is because I have visited the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. The Tenement Museum features Russ & Daughters because it was opened by a man with no sons. Rather than lament that he did not have a boy to run the family business, Joel Russ simply ran his deli with his daughters. Today, Russ & Daughters is on the National Historic Register (Price, 2014). This is not, however, the first time bagels have been involved in progressive thinking.

Bagels come out of poor and persecuted Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Their liberal symbolism may have begun there, but it certainly did not end there. Bagels also became distinctly intertwined with labor unions in the United States, and today most Jewish Americans are Democrats (Weinzweig, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2013). The poorest Polish Jews often resorted to selling bagels on the street for just pennies in order to survive (Weinzweig, 2009). For them, bagels were a survival mechanism and sometimes the only way to make money at all. Although living conditions changed when Jewish immigrants arrived in America, to say they improved is not always accurate. Bagel bakers, many of whom were Jewish immigrants, worked in difficult, sweatshop-like conditions in the early years. To fight these brutal conditions, they formed a union—Bagel Bakers Local 338. Local 338 was not the first bakers' union formed, but they were the hardest and longest lasting and were known for their toughness (Frost, 2018). They were the only union to successfully pull bagel bakers out of the poorly ventilated, cockroach infested basements in which they previously worked. To be a member of Local 338, one had to have an ancestor that had worked in these squalid conditions (Frost, 2018). Once Local 338 was formed, there were virtually no non-union bagel bakers in the Lower East Side. The union was so large that, when they went on strike over a contract dispute, 32 out of 34 bagel bakeries closed, leaving New York City in a “bagel famine” (Frost, 2018). In a later strike,

Local 338 threatened bagel truck drivers into going on strike with them. Although the union disbanded in 1971, as automation in the bagel industry took over, their negative attitude toward bagels becoming mainstream remains prominent among more traditional Jewish New Yorkers.

Jewish Americans tend to lean liberal in their politics. According to Pew Research Center, around 70% of Jewish Americans identified as Democrats as of 2013 (2013). There are more than two times the number of Jewish liberals in America as there are Jewish conservatives, and Jewish Americans are more liberal overall than most other religious groups in the US (Pew Research Center, 2013). However, the progressiveness of Jewish Americans does not mean that they are not traditional about their bagels and other Jewish foods. Many Jewish public figures and authors have disdain for the mass production of bagels. They disapprove of them being made, both literally and figuratively, more easily digestible to the American public (Weinzweig, 2009). Some posit that the bagels one buys in a plastic bag of six at the grocery store are not real bagels, while others argue that sweet bagel flavors, like blueberry, are a wholly different kind of baked good—certainly not a bagel (Weinzweig, 2009; Sarna, 2018). Bagel Bakers Local 338 also fought hard against the mass production of bagels, picketing against bringing automatic bagel machines to New York and appealing to customers that mass-produced bagels were not authentic (Frost, 2018). Although mass production mainstreamed a traditionally ethnic food—the average, non-Jewish American was not familiar with bagels until anywhere between the mid-sixties and the late seventies—many Jewish foodies feel that the bagel lost its cultural roots during these years as well (Fiegl, 2008). In all fairness, it pretty much did. Mass-produced bagels have a distinctly different crust and are sweeter than the bagels of traditional Jewish delis, and over the years the bagel that the average American is familiar with has lost a lot of its ethnic flair (Weinzweig, 2009).

Beignets and bagels are both tied to specific ethnic traditions. Beignets, to the Acadian French in Louisiana, and bagels, to Ashkenazim in New York. Although beignets have made their way to restaurants and cafes outside of New Orleans, they are far less mainstream and common in the United States than bagels are. Both dishes have staunch traditionalists upholding traditional methods; Café du Monde has not changed its baking techniques since its opening, and Jewish delis like Russ & Daughters are still family-run and use traditional Jewish techniques. However, beignets have not faced the same type of mainstreaming that bagels have. While Café du Monde is a huge tourist attraction in New Orleans, the bagel industry is national and was worth billions by the mid-nineties (Fiegl, 2008). When I began writing this paper, I thought the comparison between beignets and bagels would simply be that one dish had become a national sensation while the other was still distinctly associated with one place. However, as I did more research, I learned that, even though the bagel is better-known, this comes with a price. Through this research I learned that an ethnic food does not often become mainstream in America without losing some of its roots. Although I began this section thinking that bagels as a household food was a sort of success on the part of Jewish bagel bakers, I now realize that these same bakers who toiled in hot basements and fought to unionize may not even recognize their own dish on supermarket shelves. Success may not come in making a food mainstream, but rather in honoring its own heritage and history.

Conclusion

Apple pie, Yum-Yum Cake, beignets, and bagels are not related at first glance, but they have so much more in common than one might think. The American experience throughout the centuries has differed so vastly and changed so quickly, but the human experience holds strong. From the earliest immigrant waves to the COVID-19 crisis, Americans, even in the land of

plenty, have known generations of poverty, oppression, and triumph. Food tells the story of how people have overcome or suffered at the hands of the time, place, and context they lived in. Bagels come directly out of the treatment of Polish Jews—treated as dirty and even murderous, they were persecuted, banned from certain professions, and pushed into poverty. Even when they arrived in the United States from Eastern Europe, they were pushed into the Lower East Side and lived in dangerous squalor. However, this experience, all of which contributed to the cultural history of the bagel, is not unique to the Jewish residents of the Lower East Side.

In New Orleans, much of the cultural uniqueness, including many Mardi Gras traditions, is based on the racial diversity. However, for all the music, food, and culture that its Black residents have contributed, they are also often relegated to poorer, more vulnerable communities. One of the poorest communities in New Orleans is the Lower Ninth Ward. It was completely devastated in flooding during Hurricane Katrina and has never since been the same. It was also a majority-Black and poor community. American cities have fully enjoyed the arts, foods, and cultural influences of their marginalized communities, whether they be Jewish, Black, or any other. However, when it comes to treatment, the stories of these four dishes and many more are intertwined with economic, ethnic, and racial oppression by the same people who enjoy the fruits of their labor. Apple pie and Yum-Yum cake, although they are not directly related with specific racial or ethnic groups, still represent some of the sacrifice and struggle that has been innate throughout the American experience.

Both Yum-Yum Cake and apple pie are marked by patriotism to a certain extent. Apple pie quickly became an American symbol, especially when American soldiers invoked it as an American value that they went overseas to fight for. However, the wheat flour and sweeter apples used in apple pie are immigrants to North America. Even so, apple pie, as with many

other patriotic symbols, has also been used negatively against marginalized groups in this country. It has been taken advantage of in a variety of ways to insult specific groups of people—some say it is too heavy and therefore the food of lower classes, others say it is so American that anyone who does not love it must not be a true American. As much as “American as apple pie” is a long-standing saying in this country, it has been used to support xenophobia. On the other hand, Yum-Yum Cake and the cultural context surrounding it celebrated Americans’ ability to overcome suffering and scarcity, and to make the best of their bad situation. However, Americans suffered very much due to the governmental and economic systems in the country at the time. The global gold standard caused the economic crash, but it was coupled with American aid to Europe taking away from American resources, as well as a poor response by the federal government. Although historical analysis, including my own, celebrates Americans’ ability to overcome hardship, much of the economic hardship related with these dishes is at the hands of the power structures in the United States.

Across all four featured dishes are elements of economic and racial oppression. A history of American people is incomplete without an understanding of the hardships dishes often grow from. While poverty is distinctly tied to Yum-Yum Cake and bagels, patriotism, race, and racism are linked closely with beignets and apple pie. However, race and poverty are also inextricably linked in this country, as marginalized groups often struggle economically, like Jewish populations in the Lower East Side or Black communities in the Lower Ninth Ward. Although these dishes are loved by many including myself, an understanding of the highs and lows of their journeys gives a greater appreciation for how truly important food is to culture. These four American baked goods have traveled far and wide to become what they are today. Although they

are a delicious treat, they are so much more, and a deep cultural examination reveals their crucial place in both their cultures of origin and American culture.

Watch these recipes in action on YouTube!

Apple Pie: <https://youtu.be/C2qTHVsijr4>

Yum-Yum Cake: https://youtu.be/_ILV-d19yzY

Beignets: <https://youtu.be/Gk14w-dIrE4>

Bagels: <https://youtu.be/TEazFSp4kYM>

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