
THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURE AND FOOD:

Exploring how food and other cultural
inputs changed consumer tastes

OZZIE GODINEZ & KATIE ENG

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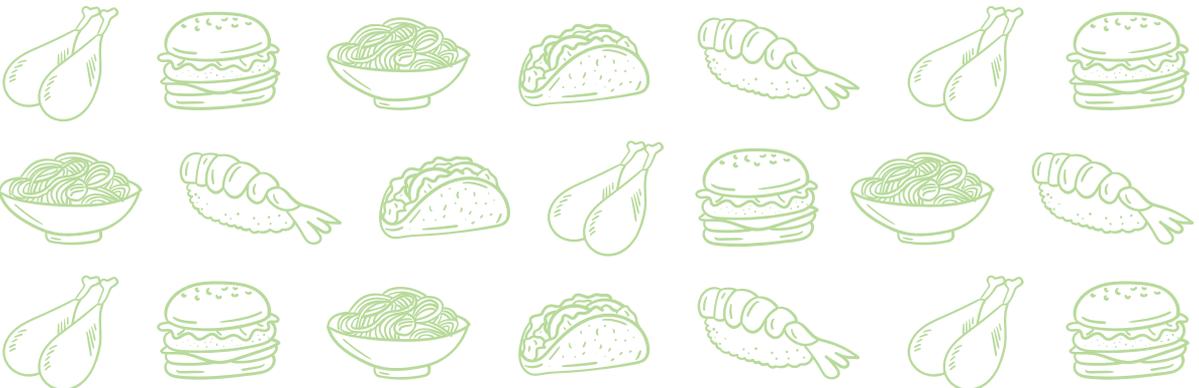
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INTRODUCTION

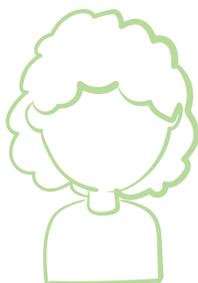


As ethnic cuisine grows to be much more than about just the food itself, marketers need to understand the connection between food and culture. Consumers today experience elements of a global culture on a daily basis, and much of that draws from food. The heritage of the food — where it comes from, who is involved in growing its ingredients, which traditions have played a role in its evolution, etc. — has become a gateway into the growing interest in specialized food.

For example, as more consumers learn about the different cuisines of Africa depending on region, the popularization of piri-piri chicken grows. That interest continues until consumers are eventually searching for the very spices that go into that dish, such as turmeric and coriander. The ending stage is personalization, where consumers pick and choose which ingredients they want in order to shape their identity.

This white paper follows the implications of that journey. In looking at the relationship between generations and cuisine, it explores where we've been and where we are going. We will show the different identities each generation uses to define ethnic food, how mainstream pop culture has helped create a comfort level of acceptance for that ethnic food's journey, and which insights from that journey food marketers can use to their advantage in order to be most effective in engaging consumers.

THE DYNAMICS OF GENERATIONAL IDENTITY AS IT RELATES TO THE VIEW OF CULTURE



How you view and engage with food and food culture is greatly shaped by your generation. Engagement with cultural diversity has evolved beyond the home and immediate neighborhood to becoming the driving point of mainstream culture everywhere. Younger generations now have the opportunity to openly participate in cultures beyond their own. They no longer feel pressured to identify with a single culture — usually the one they were born into — but they can pick among several cultures in an effort to shape an identity that suits their own perception of who they are and what they want to express.

Culture's evolutionary track will be driven by something that is curated within the home to something that is curated in the media to something curated within the individual. Their view will be determined by their generation. The following is a breakdown of what each generation expects from culture and how they perceive their relationship with it.

1925 – 1945

Seniors. For the eldest, culture is heritage. It shapes their identity and their chief expectation is that culture is preserved, presented accurately, and respected. We see this in play during many religious celebrations and at ethnic cultural festivals that present traditional music, food, crafts, and dance.

1946 – 1964

Baby Boomers. This generation views culture as something that can be easily defined. They seek to form a connection with culture in an attempt to acknowledge and understand it. This group is likely to sign up for travel adventures in exotic locales that highlight ethnic food and music. They aren't mixing food dishes, but appreciate experiencing cultures one at a time. Like the eldest, culture is curated from the inside.

1965 – 1980

Generation X. This middle generation views themselves as part of culture. They make things, they curate. They see culture as strengthening the community they live in, so they want it to be relatable and accessible to all others. This generation is the first to see culture as something they can access outside, most likely because this is the first generation to have online access in addition to their higher college attendance rates and embrace of urbanization. Because they interact with the world both virtually and in person, this generation has a heightened acceptance of other cultures.

1981 – 1996

Millennials. For this generation, culture is woven into their identity. They do not just see themselves as participating in culture, their sense of authenticity is tied up with all things culture. They are explorers and seek to educate themselves about cultures that are not their own. Their media outreach is the widest of previous generations.

Millennials represent the last generation that has the idea that culture is something you are born into, opposed to being something you choose to identify with. Generation Z, on the other hand, doesn't 'get' the idea of appropriation. That's because they believe that every culture is their own and they have a right to pick and choose any of its aspects regardless of whether or not they were born into it directly.

1997 – CURRENT

Generation Z. The youngest generation sees themselves as influencers. Culture is significant when it is immersive or has relevance to the lives they are shaping. They are comfortable personalizing their experiences, which means they pick and choose which elements of different culture that appeal to them. They have no borders when it comes to culture. For them, all culture is global, accessible, and available to borrow.

INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

As technology continues to make culture more global and less insular within the home, what defines culture will also continue to change. Each generation will continue to explore the elements of culture they personally identify with and then adopt them as they see fit.

The younger the generation the greater the influence they will feel from older influencers who are family and friends, and media influencers. The myriad of perspectives and choices and legacies will make them more independent to determine what works best for them. They will be most open to experimenting and explorations of cultural elements to create new dishes that they can promote via social media and use to show they are true citizens of the world, not just their zipcode.

What is new about this cycle is Generation Z: The increased diversity in their ranks means that authenticity is about whichever cultures they choose to adopt. How they've changed the dynamics of identity compared to previous generations, coupled with greater access to information about global cultures, is changing the relationship consumers have with cultural diversity.

THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY: WHERE WE WERE, WHERE WE ARE HEADED

“TODAY’S
YOUNGEST
GENERATION
IDENTIFIES
WITH ALL
CULTURES”

The concept of cultural diversity has changed as each new generation has determined its meaning over time. And coming generations will be more diverse: The U.S. population is moving closer to becoming minority-majority, a reality that the U.S. Census says will happen by 2045. Today, consumers are living in more diverse communities and, thanks to social media and other technology, they have greater gateways of exposure to different cultures. This is opposed to older generations who lived in more homogenous communities with fewer options to explore the world. Because of these shifts, today’s youngest generation identifies with all cultures, a distinction that is creating greater opportunities for marketers.

Each stage of a generation’s journey represents an evolution in culture, from first exploring it within one’s own small community, to a stage where culture is shared globally and is the focal point of everyday living. The stages are:

Heritage. Here, culture was groomed within the home or tight ethnic community. Consumers celebrated holidays and practiced traditions both as a source of pride and to continue them for future generations. These traditions — from recipes to songs — did not travel far outside the world in which they were born.

Legacy. This is the world of cultural experiences. Elements of culture, such as food dishes, expand outside the world and are discovered by consumers who are excited about learning about cultures beyond their own.

Heritage Legacy

Blended Personal

Blended. In this stage, cultural elements are no longer an "other" but represent entry points for diversity at large. This is a response to the consumer need for "authenticity" in their food choices. In doing so, they represent a wider market for products that speak to cultural diversity and are willing to introduce ethnic flavors with traditional dishes as well as try more than one ethnic dish at the same time.

Personal. This is where we are heading. This is a world where cultures are not siloed but are ingrained in all elements of society. Consumers no longer pick and choose cultures but pick and choose elements of culture they want to identify with. Food, not the culture it emerged from, is the focal point of storytelling.

CULTURAL ENTRY POINTS IN THE MAINSTREAM

**“FOOD IS
LEADING
PEOPLE TO
THE CULTURE”**

If we are now moving toward a world where food is ingrained in all the touchpoints of our lives, how is that dynamic realized so far in mainstream media?

How food is presented today via entertainment is leading consumers to explore not just the food, but also the culture from where the food originated. In other words, food is leading people to the culture, just as culture often leads consumers to explore food. So it makes sense that the line between cultural exploration and food exploration is blurring. Consumers have greater access to information about other cultures and it is easier for them to view food as a gateway to something new and interesting cultural experiences.

This dynamic is the basis for recent mainstream entertainment content that makes cuisine a focal point of entry. Food shows and travel shows are now ubiquitous, as both present cuisine as an important part of the travel experience in exploring non-western regions of the world. Trying new dishes is presented as a cultural exploration, the same as participating in a native ritual or exploring an exotic nature preserve. In all of these examples, the driving appeal is the opportunity to learn more about an unknown culture and, in this process, the more niche dishes the better.

Here are some examples from mainstream entertainment that reflect how content provides similar entry points to explore the wider culture.

Crazy Rich Asians. This hit 2018 film was billed as a romantic comedy featuring an all-Asian cast, but its lasting cultural importance was how it gave non-Asian viewers a portal into a wide range of Asian customs, particularly those that showed the cultural differences among Asian families.

Coco. Not just another animated children's film, this 2017 release from Disney/Pixar gave viewers of all ages a history lesson of Dia de Muertos – increasing general awareness of both the holiday and the culture surrounding it.

Ramy. A series on the streaming service Hulu, Ramy documents the life of comedian Ramy Youssef, a first-generation Egyptian-American. Viewers are exposed to the many dimensions of Muslim culture in America.

Fresh Off the Boat. An ABC network sitcom, this series follows the lives of a Chinese family in the U.S. The generational differences among the characters reflect competing priorities and cultures within a single family.

Lil Nas X. A singer-rapper who is gay and performs a blend of country music and hip-hop. His music is an entry point for all of those influences, blended together.

K-Pop. The popularity of this this genre, which includes hit groups like BTS, mixes western pop music with Korean lyrics and themes.

They Called Us Enemy. Written by Star Trek actor George Takei, this graphic novel teaches the history of Japanese-Americans during WWII through his personal experience in U.S. internment camps.

Shadowbringers. An expansion of the Final Fantasy gaming franchise, this game is steeped in South American mythology and uses Peruvian culture to drive the narrative.



THE CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH

**“LEAD TO
AN INCREASE
IN NEW
OPPORTUNITIES
FOR INTRODUCING
NEW FLAVORS
AND DISHES”**

In a cross-cultural approach, the media examples above represent “reverse assimilation — in” which cultural traditions of rapidly-growing minority groups have begun to shape mainstream culture and consumption patterns.

As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, more consumers will crisscross ethnic boundaries in the films, television shows, online media, fashion, and cuisine. For restaurants and other food operators, this cultural journeying will undoubtedly lead to an increase in new opportunities for introducing new flavors and dishes to consumers who otherwise have been culturally shielded from them.

Apart from reverse assimilation, there are two other processes that we see in cross-cultural marketing: retro acculturation and ethnic fluidity. Both are present in current trends involving food.

Retro-acculturation refers to the process of a minority group moving away from fully assimilating to a dominant, mainstream culture to rediscover its roots and revive its cultural traditions. For example, Hispanic youth are proudly reclaiming their heritage and influencing mainstream culture in the process. We often assume culture flows in one direction from a dominant mainstream group to minority groups. Yet as minorities become more economically and culturally influential, we're seeing cultural traditions of rapidly growing minority groups influence mainstream culture and consumption patterns.

Ethnic fluidity is identifying with one ethnicity in some contexts and a different ethnicity in others. Ultimately, with ethnic identity as a whole, we can't presume to know which ethnicity people identify with or what role ethnicity plays within a given category context or consumption environment.

HOW FOOD TRAVELS TODAY



As we've seen, younger consumers are no longer exploring food through flavor alone — their reach is wider, and they are creating new food ideas based on more than one cultural tradition.



What is new in food circles is increased availability of ingredients or recipes once considered exotic because they were not readily available. Now that different ingredients are readily available — opposed to only having access to ingredients in the immediate area where consumers live — people are now capable of trying new dishes wherever they live. Younger consumers no longer need special occasions at home to taste traditional recipes. Now they can prepare those dishes on their own — and they feel the freedom to innovate them with ingredients or preparation methods borrowed for any ethnicity they choose.



That innovative spirit is where both Generation Z and Millennials are today. They are more comfortable than previous generations in merging cultures together in the kitchen. In the future we will increasingly see consumers preparing dishes based on inspiration or the desire to explore. Pride in one's heritage will still play an important role. but, there is new interest in sharing one's legacy beyond the home. Once these flavors, preparation methods, or ingredients move outside the home they become part of the overall culture.





Here are three examples of traditional food dishes that have made this cross-cultural journey:

Mexican Cuisine

- The staples of Mexican cuisines are well-known, and for older consumers they are connected to Mexican heritage and holidays.
- As mass entertainment content like the animated film *Coco* brought those traditions to mainstream attention, as more Latino stars like Pitbull and Jennifer Lopez are at the top of the music food chain, and as more U.S. cities showcased their Mexican heritage, there was growing interest in more regional Mexican cuisine that is in the style of the traditional staples, but have their own identity.
- Millennials pushed this exploration further by creating these dishes in their home or popularizing restaurants that offer them. This was part of their search to be unique and to have a true foodie experience, opposed to just dining out for general "Mexican food" like burritos or tortas.
- Finally, ingredients and other variants from these staples are mixed with American staples to create unique dishes of their own. These dishes didn't represent one culture or another. Instead, they were a fusion of many and represented the creativity of the person preparing or enjoying them.

African Cuisine

- Cultural benchmarks like the film Black Panther, the popularity of African beats in Top 40 music, the introduction of African textiles at Fashion Week, and other pivot events exposed African culture to the wider mainstream.
- There was a growing interest in African food. Fans of spicy food turned to Ethiopian cuisine, for example.
- That led to interest in different regional spices; we saw cooking shows devote more segments to these variants.
- Because of its generous use of whole grain and vegetables, regional food dishes became popular among American foodie types. They emphasized its health benefits and not just its cultural origin.

Korean Cuisine

- Korean culture gained notice in the U.S. through popular culture: K-Beauty products, K-Pop groups like BTS, Black Pink, and EXO, and Korean dramas that became easily available via Netflix and other U.S. streaming services.
- Korean food is mostly in the home. But its regional variants showed up in menus and at grocery stores because of its different flavors and health benefits.
- Kimchi arrived, becoming a popular dish. Here, it was largely detached from its country of origin and was a becomes a popular side dish at non-Korean restaurants.
- Finally, food trucks, which represent niche food offerings, started popularizing Korean barbecue and other dishes. Suddenly, American enjoyed Korean food just as they would hot dogs or hamburgers during lunchtime.

KEY INSIGHTS

“FUSION DISHES WILL WORK BEST FOR YOUNGER CONSUMERS”

Consumers are now weaving elements of multiple cultures together into their personal lives, redefining their personal views alongside of their family heritage.

Opportunity: Marketers can tell consumers what certain ingredients or menu items say about them based on the country of origin of those products.

Opportunity: They can connect the dots back to where the products originated and drive home messaging that celebrates that heritage.

Consumers are now experiencing elements of a global culture on a daily basis — and in some cases may not even realize it.

Opportunity: Menu items can include special maps or tidbits (“did you know that?”) about the countries of origin to dishes featuring multiple ingredients.

Where older generations focused on legacy preservation and cultural heritage, younger generations are looking for how they can impact their culture, rather than just participate in it.

Opportunity: Fusion dishes will work best for younger consumers as they see beyond culture and want to be seen as contributing to the popularity of a new trend. They will also respond to ingredients or recipes that encourage experimentation.

One way to make this connection is through one-day cooking classes where they can fuse different ingredients together with traditional dishes to create new flavors.

Consumers are picking and choosing elements of any culture with which they personally identify.

Opportunity: Instead of only promoting the origin of the product, marketers can promote what certain ingredients or dishes "say" about the person. Emphasizing the personalization appeal of the items will make it easier for those consumers to choose.

Food is leading consumers to explore culture, and culture is leading consumers to explore food.

Opportunity: Marketers can make special efforts to put food in the context of culture through experiences that emphasize exciting aspects of the country of origin. Special events that introduce dance or film from the country can accompany the dining, for example.

Opportunity: Events that introduce the chef or another expert who can tell the story of the dishes and maybe get diners to sign up for a guided getaway that will explore other cultural opportunities in the country of origin.

Push traditional limits

The consumer desire for real experiences and easier access to global ingredients are both creating a more adventurous eater.

Opportunity: Marketers should not be shy about creating dishes that push traditional limits. The differentiator in their messaging should be the most unorthodox ingredients or items on the menu. The messaging should promise unfiltered experiences that will confirm the consumer's desire to stand out from the crowd.

No longer are we exploring food through flavor alone — our reach is wider, and we are creating new food ideas based on the culture itself.

Opportunity: Menu items can go deeper into the culture by presenting dishes that are regional and more local, accompanied by information that explains their differences with their traditional counterparts.

Opportunity: Experiences that start with culture — discussions or screenings of books or films based in the country of origin, for example — can then lead to dishes that are based on those stories.

CONCLUSION



**“NOW ETHNIC
FOOD IS GLOBAL”**

The cross-cultural approach to food shows it is inseparable from the culture. Food moves into the mainstream through culture, but over time, food helps lead the culture until ingredients are seen as global and not just regional.

This is entirely new for the ethnic food market. In the past, ethnic food tended to operate in silos. People separated Mexican or Italian food from general American cuisine. This was the result of how generations identified with ethnic food, with the oldest generation tending to keep the traditions of ethnic cuisine within the family, home, or immediate neighborhood. For a time, this prevented these recipes from traveling.

However, as younger generations came up, ethnic culture started gaining footholds into mainstream culture. This included food. Access to cooking shows, travel experiences, and more helped generate a heightened interest, not just in the food, but its provenance. This helped ethnic food travel from inside the home to the homes of non-ethnic consumers. Now, instead of eating food only identified as “Mexican,” for example, consumers were enjoying eating cuisine from different regions of Mexico, because they knew more about the complexities of those countries.

Now, ethnic food is global. It serves as a vehicle for personalization. Consumers can pick and choose which spices or ingredients they find useful to create their own dishes. In this new dynamic, they are the ones influencing the food, not the other way around. The endpoint for the journey of ethnic food is one that celebrates cultural diversity through dishes that everyone takes a part in making.

**PACO
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