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Supermom vs. Supermarket: How Suburbia Changed What's for Dinner

NICOLE HIMEL

Ella V. Schwing Award

Something's wrong with me. I lift my head from the homework I'm doing at the kitchen table, and I listen to my body. And my body is saying, "Hey, missy, we haven't eaten since breakfast, and while that was very nice, it's now 2:00 and I want more." I look at the time, and sure enough, it's about time to eat. I put down my pencil and go to the fridge. I have no idea what to eat, but I've got a lot of options. I spy some mac & cheese my roommate made, food that, although convenient, I'm surprised to find truly holds no allure for me at the moment.

Growing up, I would have thirds of the stuff, with whatever potato and meat combination my mom made for dinner. Funny that it should wind up as leftovers in my fridge for the past ten years. Mac & cheese. Hamburger Helper. Instant rice and mashed potatoes. I remember annoying my mom in the kitchen by asking her what she was doing. "Well, sweetie, you just heat up some water, and put in everything that's in the box." Oh. Behold, my cooking prowess. Actually, I think I was around twelve or thirteen before I learned the magic of bringing water to a boil. Now that I think of it, I don't think I ever would have taken the initiative to make a salad when I was still living at home. If it didn't involve a microwave, it wasn't food. When I was growing up, the dinner plate was set up with meat, a carb, and another carb. Just like all of my "no-breakfast-school-

lunch-big dinner” suburban peers. Although I have a few friends with strong roots to their heritage, one being a dual-citizen of Germany and America, and one with strong Finnish roots, everyone ate the same things. I guess that’s just our food culture. But wait, why would I have the same food culture as my friends from other parts of the country, or other parts of the world? My mom’s family is from Puerto Rico, and we eat the same food as Germans? Since when? What is this disconnect from our cultures that we have in regards to food? Have the families of suburbia traded in a variety of cultures for a standard that has been set among them? And what kind of standard is that, anyway? Can diverse food cultures even be plausibly practiced in suburbia?

A lot of questions. The first set of answers I found to be the most easily answered by posing a survey to people like my mom, the parents of suburbia. Thirty to fifty years of age, these people are local to the New Orleans area, and subsequently accustomed to New Orleanian food and traditions. They are veterans of the crawfish boil, and occasional users of Tony Chachere’s. However, in my survey, I sought to understand what they ate, and what they fed their children, on a daily basis. Most of these moms had varying amounts of assistance with their kids. Most said they did most of the cooking; all but one said the main focus of their family meals was convenience. This brings us to the priorities of suburbia, which lie outside the home: the soccer games, the club activities, the sleepovers and birthday parties. And that’s just the kids. The adults have the wonders of the office with deadlines, company meetings, and the yearly self-evaluation. After a hectic day at work, or a tiring work out at karate, there’s just one thing that everybody in the family can come together and enjoy...watching TV. Eating dinner becomes something to do while “Idol” is on. And with all this entertainment, it’s no wonder that most of the paycheck isn’t going to food. Compared to all these high-tech commodities, food is often the smallest expense in the family budget. And why not? There is every reason to enjoy fast, cheap, and low-fat/low-carb diet-accommodating food, especially when it so readily caters to the American food culture.

But what exactly is the American food culture? When thinking

about food cultures, I associate certain food types with certain parts of the globe. China gets rice, Japan gets fish, to South America I give exotic fruits, Ireland gets potatoes, Italy gets olives, Switzerland gets chocolate, and France gets cheese – lots and lots of cheese. But what comes to mind when we think of “American” food, that more than half of those surveyed said they grew up on, and all of those surveyed said they regularly feed their kids? You think of America, and her food, what exactly comes to mind? Maybe it’s grilled hotdogs and hamburgers on the forth of July, or maybe something even *more* iconic, fast food and soft drinks. I asked this question of Michael Deese, a twenty-one-year-old college student, born and bred on the west bank. “Actually, I think of packaged food,” he answered, after a moment. “Rice-a-Roni, Zataran’s, stuff like that.” I then asked him if that was what his mother fed him when he was a kid. “Yeah, I grew up on that, mostly,” he replied. What a coincidence, Michael -so did I.

Interestingly enough, while Michael’s family hails from Louisiana, my grandmother—my Abuela, rather—was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Funny that we were raised on the same exact fare. I guess it shouldn’t be too surprising, though, when you take into account the amount of money being spent on advertisements for packaged meals and sides; you’d be hard pressed to find someone in our country that hasn’t heard of the “San Francisco Treat.” Yes, even though we come from different family backgrounds, our parents had something in common: they controlled what we ate, and in doing so, became a prime target for advertisements found in magazines, on the radio, on the holy television, and even in the very supermarket they were shopping in: aisles of maternal advice from the red spoon of Betty Crocker and the friendly concern of Hamburger Helper’s handy glove. Yes, these figures came to introduce us to new recipes, (as well as related products we might enjoy, all conveniently located on the side of the box), informed us about how to eat “healthily”, and even did most of the cooking for us. They did their job, and they did it well; they replaced mom. And the good thing about New Mom was that she would never leave us. No matter how old we got, how independent, there she was, in the magazines and commercials and aisles. Always cooking for us, and always reminding us of our culture

and our heritage. And the five-minute microwave rice marches on into the next generation of eaters.

New Mom does a very good job of making it implausible that we could have ever lived without her. Although it may seem to a younger generation, like mine, that a world without industrialized food and nutrition facts is an archaic part of our history reserved for some older country, somewhere far away, it wasn't very long ago at all that people fended for themselves. And they didn't just get by, either; they thrived. And they ate a lot better than what New Mom's been feeding us. My Paw Paw Bob (German/French, not Puerto Rican) had a lot to say about the quality of food he ate growing up on country French cooking in rural Louisiana. They always had fresh vegetables growing, milked their own cows, and even slaughtered their own pigs. "There were no supermarkets then," he informed me during my interview with him, "so you would barter. You would pick your eggs and trade them in for other groceries, like rice and flour." Interesting that, as a child, my grandfather would have access to such a wide variety of vegetables and different recipes. A lot more than, say, I did as a child. I think my exploration of food went to chicken nuggets, and that's about it. After all, with the mystery meat in chicken nuggets and hot dogs, along with the coloring, preservatives, other additives, and endless unpronounceable ingredients, I'm sure my diet consisted of far more interesting things than my Paw Paw would know what to do with. I never really learned how to cook from either of my parents. Even my father left me out in the cold when it came to making my own food.

Now, it is not my intention to present evidence against the people that have provided for me all these years. To the contrary, I must defend them as readily as I must defend myself, as well as their parents, my Abuela, and Paw Paw included. It didn't start with Mom and Dad, after all. Paw Paw got busy running various restaurants, and two other children before my dad probably made the task of educating *another one* even less of an attractive task. And besides, by then, New Mom was there, ready to help. My Abuela is a different story, however. And I offer this because I truly think that it represents a common occurrence in our country that greatly affects the question of food

culture in America. Abuela had ample time to teach my mother, her first born, the intricacies of ethnic cooking, and she did try, but the obvious truth is this: As a teenager growing up in the 80's, my mother did not care. She's an American, after all. None of her friends ate this stuff. Why couldn't they just have pizza, like everybody else? I imagine it was devastatingly embarrassing for my mom to bring her lunch to school as a younger girl, and not unpack a wonder bread sandwich and a juice box. Eventually, Abuela realized that it was more important for her to be happy. After all, embracing this culture couldn't be bad; everyone else seemed perfectly happy and healthy. And New Mom always helps out. So New Mom raised my mother, who traded in her unique food culture for the recipes on the side of the box

And so I was very surprised in my freshman year of high school when I calculated my Body Mass Index. I discovered that I, who didn't think that I ate too many sweets, or anything, was classified as overweight. A few years and a lot less meat later, I'm pretty normally proportioned, a little on the thin side, actually. On the other hand, my mother is now overweight. Though she exercises regularly and is involved in various work-related health programs, her diet is filled not only with indulgences, but with much more dangerous, average looking, food. The pantry is filled with boxes and cans, covered with health claims and their ever-present asterisks. My mother worked all throughout my childhood, and I've always admired her for doing so, but between climbing the corporate ladder, keeping up with the Joneses, and allotting me all the amenities suburbia could offer, there was simply no time for anyone but the Supermarket to dictate what we would eat, how, and when. And now, though I still find myself going back to that walk-in advertisement devoid of culture and actual *food* that my mother depends on for guidance, I can clutch my list of ingredients needed to make my Paw Paw's gumbo, and know that I am safe. It's never too late.

I'm back in the kitchen. Still hungry and still staring indecisively into the fridge. I push aside the plastic ware of mac & cheese and ... oh, look! My roommate got *baby spinach*! My eyes light up, and my stomach roars. I better fix this up quick. So a few mushrooms, half

an orange, a can of tuna and a mixing bowl later, I have my Maw Maw's spinach salad that I can't even finish off. "Better?" I ask to my stomach. Gurgle, "Much." I cover the rest with some saran wrap and wonder at how I got full so fast. Especially on *just* a salad. Putting the leftovers into the fridge, I give a dirty look to the macaroni. I slam the door in its face and think, "Take *that*, Kraft." ☐



The Joint, Laura Steffan