

# SIX WOMEN WHO SHAPED WHAT AMERICANS EAT

**Food Choice in an  
Age of Abundance**

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# Introduction

In March 1943, *The Saturday Evening Post* featured Norman Rockwell's painting *Freedom from Want* on its cover. The painting was wildly popular and has since endured as an iconic illustration of American identity. A grandmother at the center of the painting presents a large roast turkey to a smiling family and friends around a holiday table. For readers of the *Post*, the joyous scene reflected the increasingly common abundance of food in the United States and how such celebratory meals brought Americans together. But the painting conveyed more than an image of plentiful food and family togetherness; it also carried political and cultural messages. Rockwell's painting was part of a series illustrating foundations of American identity, the "Four Freedoms" announced by President Franklin Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union speech: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. Rockwell's choice to depict Freedom from Want as a large turkey enjoyed by a happy family was apt, illustrating the undeniable bounty of American agriculture in the twentieth century as well as the visceral feeling that people experienced economic well-being through the food widely available to them. In short, being American meant always having enough to eat. It is a cultural association that has continued down to the present day.

Plentiful food presented Americans with an envious dilemma: what to eat? With abundance came *choice*, and questions that were otherwise simple became more complicated. What should one eat and how much, and was that a matter of individual choice? To what extent did government officials, scientists, chefs, and food corporations influence—even determine—what people ate? Moreover, how did American food culture shift in response to individual choice or institutional pressures? The complexities of food choice do not stop there. What factors most shaped individual choice? Taste? Cultural traditions? Cost? Health concerns? Worries about the environment or animal welfare? Or was individual choice illusory in the face of an industrial food system that determined what people would eat?

Two basic assumptions underlie the following discussion of these questions. First, the industrial system that produced abundance was entrenched and dominant in the United States. Second, American food choices were contested, and multiple factors (material and cultural) determined what people ate. From these starting points, this book tells the story of how responses to food abundance determined what people ate.

The story that follows uses six different women to guide us through the thicket of an industrial system that both constrained and encouraged food choice. Each of these women had strong ideas about what Americans should eat, and their opinions were formed by an embrace or rejection of the industrial food system and the abundance it created. The six women profiled here confronted the dilemmas that shaped food choices—and they each came up with different answers. Their impact on American foodways was thus unique and long lasting and integrated into the middle-class, public culture. The women had various professional roles, as government officials, cookbook authors, academics, journalists, and restaurateurs. They were active over many decades, from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. Some were more familiar in the broader public culture, some less so. The following chapters do not attempt to provide detailed biographies of each of these women. Rather, the focus will be on highlights of their professional work that illustrate broader themes in American foodways and the impact of food abundance in the modern era.

The women profiled are the following: Hazel Stiebeling, a chemist and government nutritionist who, beginning in the 1930s, helped shape dietary guidelines and school lunches affecting generations of Americans; Poppy Cannon, a best-selling cookbook author and newspaper columnist who first gained fame in the 1950s by preaching the wonders of processed food; Julia Child, another cookbook author and television personality, who, starting in the 1960s, celebrated French cuisine and made it accessible to American cooks and palates; Frances Moore Lappé, an author and activist on the environmental impact of food in the late twentieth century who was credited with introducing vegetarianism to the mainstream; Marion Nestle, an academic nutritionist, government consultant, and author who decried the undue influence of food corporations; and Alice Waters, a celebrity chef and restaurateur, food activist, and symbol of alternative food movements in the twenty-first century.

As indicated by their different professions, the concerns of these women were distinct. To differing degrees, they highlighted the politics of food, the pleasure of food, the connection between food and health, and the environmental

harm of poor food choices. They were all active in an age of food abundance and the industrial production of food—conditions so naturalized in the public culture they were virtually invisible. Importantly, they differed in their reactions to that industrial abundance. The first three—Stiebeling, Cannon, and Child—embraced the benefits of that system, with little question or criticism. By contrast, Lappé, Nestle, and Waters all criticized one or more aspects of the modern American food system, including its cultural, economic, health, and environmental impacts. They argued that abundance—counterintuitively—had its downsides.

Counterintuitive, indeed. What could be a downside of abundant food? The benefits of abundance are obvious. During the decades discussed here, the ability to produce sufficient food for the country as a whole was not in doubt, even if food distribution and access was unbalanced (and indeed lacking for some). Beyond sufficiency, the United States enjoyed plentiful food through an efficient system of industrial agriculture, processing, distribution, and trade. Abundance, then, demonstrated the success of the modern food system. That system did not simply appear in the middle of the twentieth century; it originated in domestic production and processing in the nineteenth century and in global trade and colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, this book will begin its discussion in the early twentieth century and focus most on the post–World War II changes to the industrial food system.<sup>1</sup>

Materially, abundance meant that most Americans had ready access to a variety of foods throughout all seasons. Few Americans had to worry about malnutrition, let alone starvation, and the majority could afford sufficient food. But the impact of abundant food went beyond material well-being. It led to what some scholars have summarized as “new ideas about nutrition, health, and sustenance.”<sup>2</sup> One of these new ideas was the *expectation* of abundance—abundance that was taken for granted. This was a powerful assumption, both for native-born Americans and immigrants newly arrived. Historian Hasia Diner summarized its impact: “Americans came to believe in their right to an acceptable standard of living wherein hunger played no role. They believed that as Americans they *all* deserved to live free from want.”<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, there were nevertheless intermittent fears about food supply; food scholar Warren Belasco observed: “Even as supermarket shelves groaned with convenience products designed to add value to the land’s mounting surpluses, Malthusian worries persisted.”<sup>4</sup>

Occasional fears, though, were swept aside by the undeniable evidence of plentiful food. Like other Americans, each of the six women discussed in this

book lived with an expectation of abundance; thus, they wasted little time wondering if the American food system could provide sufficient food to support the population. They had other concerns. Hazel Stiebeling, Poppy Cannon, and Julia Child sought to influence the food *choices* that Americans made. Stiebeling wanted Americans to choose nutritious food and a well-balanced diet. Cannon and Child encouraged Americans to experiment with products and recipes to produce desirable meals. Meanwhile, Frances Moore Lappé, Marion Nestle, and Alice Waters encouraged Americans to make food choices that would overcome the problems of the industrial food system. For them, food abundance had created environmental problems and global inequalities, chronic diseases, overly powerful corporate producers, and a hollowed-out food culture dominated by processed foods. Thus, whether these women celebrated the benefits of food abundance or critiqued the problems of the existing system, they all sought to influence Americans' food choices.

It is fair to ask whether questions about food choice—in comparison with the more important achievement of providing sufficient sustenance for all—really matter and why. This book offers an emphatic yes in answer to the first question, arguing that interrogating food choices can shift our framework of understanding culture and the economy more broadly. While assessments of food history are most often reduced to either a story of quantity or of quality (and desire), this book treats both the quantity and quality of food as important and intertwined, and it asserts that the tensions between these categories have political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental effects.

Each of the women discussed in this book had a significant and lasting impact on American food culture, but they were not alone in that regard in their respective fields or eras. Moreover, it is fair to say that these are not the only figures who might have been selected to represent shifts in American food culture; indeed, as the following pages will indicate, and a rich literature in food studies illustrates, there are numerous individuals who have had significant impact on American food culture. The six women profiled in these pages are best understood as exemplars of particular changes and viewpoints, not solitary voices disconnected from cultural trends. Thus, the women were *touchstones*, representative of changes broadly shared by large groups of people and already underway.

Allowing for the idea that the women profiled here were chosen for their ability to illustrate broader cultural trends, why *these* women and *these* cultural trends? The first criterion for selecting subjects was their degree of influence in the broad public culture. Such influence was found in their professional positions, their cultural visibility, and their lasting impact over more than one era.

For instance, Hazel Stiebeling held an authoritative position in the US Department of Agriculture, helping to shape nutrition advice that would impact soldiers, schoolchildren, and ordinary citizens. She is the least well known of the figures today, but she was active over more than thirty years in the USDA, was known in the mainstream press during her career, and received presidential recognition for her work. Poppy Cannon and Julia Child were both best-selling authors, popular and influential, inspiring changes in home cooking that have continued in various forms to the present. Frances Moore Lappé was also a best-selling author whose first book, *Diet for a Small Planet*, remains known as one of the turning points in American food and environmental discourse. Marion Nestle was best known among academics and food activists, though her critiques about food politics filtered out more broadly through the mainstream media. Alice Waters first became well known in the world of high-end cuisine in the 1970s, then famous in the press and among activists as an embodiment of alternative foodways to the present day.

The second criterion used to select protagonists for this discussion was to find women who had something important to say regarding the industrial food system, either embracing its many advantages or critiquing its unintended consequences. The industrial food system has influenced food choice and consumption, shaping food culture; it has also had broad environmental, health, and economic impacts over the past century. Stiebeling, Cannon, and Child worked *within* an industrial food system so ubiquitous and successful that it was naturalized, an unquestioned structure. The abundant food it produced inspired them to believe that all Americans could have optimal, nutritional diets as well as enjoyable cuisine. While Lappé, Nestle, and Waters did not question the desirability of food sufficiency and convenience, they argued that the modern industrial food system fell short in other ways. They—and some of their contemporaries—asked whether the benefits of industrialization were worth the environmental costs, inequality of food distribution, chronic health problems, and what one food historian described as “standardized mass-produced processed dishes” with “predictable homogeneity.”<sup>5</sup>

The choice to highlight the impact of these six women raises another important question: why only women and not men? The exclusion of men from this survey is an intentional choice. The relationship between women and food can be taken at face value as a bedrock of American culture, as sociologist Shelley Koch observed: “Cooking as a characteristic of a traditional culinary femininity is an extension of the love and care women provide their families.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, such gender observations can also be interrogated as both an affirmation of

stereotypes and a challenge to them. This book will examine when food choices and the advice about what to eat was more or less gendered, and whether the impact of these six people was related to their gender.

Along with debates about the industrial food system, the importance of abundance in American food culture, and the impact of gender on American foodways, this book highlights other recurring questions and tensions. Foremost among these is a consideration of whether modern Americans viewed food primarily as a practical necessity for sustenance and survival or as a source of pleasure and a way to fulfill sensual desires. A corollary set of questions is whether food reflected cultural traditions as well as a connection to the natural world or if food was better understood as a demonstration of modern science and technology, measured by the quantities produced and consumed. One other broad, overlapping set of questions used to understand food choices is to ask how class identity and available resources impacted food choices; moreover, did food in the modern era cut across class differences or reinforce them?

That last question raises an important caveat. This book does not seek to present a comprehensive picture of American food culture with all of its regional, ethnic, racial, and class differences. As many scholars have made clear (and any perusal of contemporary cookbooks and cooking shows would affirm), American food culture is not monolithic. It is multicultural and multiregional, reflecting the diversity of a multiracial nation of immigrants, and it has evolved over time.<sup>7</sup> This book does not attempt to capture the richness and variety of food throughout the United States. What is discussed here are changes in American foodways that are found in the broad public culture, as reflected in US government policies, industrial food products, and information appearing in national media and publications. For much of American history, such public culture was dominated by white middle-class values and power, shaped heavily by European, especially Anglo, roots. Thus, for better or worse, the foodways discussed in this book are not encyclopedic.

Nevertheless, the following chapters will range over various topics and issues within the framework described. The first chapter will focus on Hazel Stiebeling, who trained as a chemist and viewed food as a collection of nutrients more than as a reflection of cultural traditions or environmental conditions. As a government nutritionist, she helped to create the recommendations for food groups and portions that shaped dietary advice for much of the twentieth century. Her work on recommended daily allowances (RDAs) also became fundamental to the design of the federal school lunch program.

The next chapter shifts to the recommendations of cookbook author and

journalist Poppy Cannon, who in the 1950s instructed middle-class housewives how to use processed food items to create elaborate, modern meals. She wrote more about the pleasurable and performative aspects of cooking than about the nutritional components of the meals served. In the 1960s, Julia Child was also a successful cookbook author and soon afterwards a television personality teaching housewives what to cook. But as the chapter about Child details, she not only emphasized the manifest pleasures of food and its creative potential, but also its deep cultural traditions from France and, later, from various American regions.

Frances Moore Lappé is the third cookbook author profiled here, but she represented a sharp departure from Cannon and Child. As discussed in chapter four, Lappé gained fame in the 1970s with her food and environmental manifesto calling on Americans to shift their diets from meat-based ones to those that were more plant-based in order to fend off a looming humanitarian and environmental disaster. Along with her environmental concerns, Lappé returned to a nutritionist perspective similar to that of Stiebeling years earlier, constructing recipes around nutritional goals rather than around taste or culture. Nevertheless, it became clear that she was more concerned with the political and environmental impact of the food system, rather than with the food itself.

Marion Nestle also viewed food from a nutritionist lens, but her focus was different from that of either Stiebeling or Lappé. Chapter five discusses the work of Nestle, an academic nutritionist who investigated how food access and food systems were manipulated in the marketplace. She consulted with the federal government to update the food guidelines put in place by Stiebeling and others decades earlier. Her work also focused on nutritional components as the measure of food, rather than its taste or culture. Beyond the food itself, Nestle was most concerned with how corporations manipulated both government nutritional guidelines and the food choices of individuals.

The last chapter in the book profiles Alice Waters, who returned to the view that food was a source of epicurean pleasure; but unlike the cookbook authors Cannon and Child, she found that pleasure in fresh ingredients, rooted in particular places rather than in packaged goods from factories or in elaborate recipes. She brought environmental concerns, similar to those of Lappé, back to the fore, as well as the nutritional concerns of Stiebeling and Nestle, asserting that the nutrient value of whole foods was shaped by the environment from which they came. Thus, in Waters's work, pleasure and practicality coexisted symbiotically. The chapter also considers Waters's relationship to "the new food movement" and its legacy.

Surveying several decades and these six influential figures, this book

addresses continuities and discontinuities in American foodways and wrestles with their implications, especially cultural, class, and environmental ones. In addition, the chapters discuss the tension between individual food choices and the systemic forces that constrain them. Thus, the story that follows will highlight some of the complexities of modern American food culture and reveal greater understanding about why we eat what we do in an age of abundance.