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Duncan Hines' Consumption Community and the Geography of American Gastronomy, 1936-1956

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Abstract

Food historian Harvey Levenstein has argued that in the early 20th century “the sorry state of American gastronomy was best typified by Duncan Hines,” then the first restaurant critic of national stature. While Hines’ best-selling guidebook of the 1930s–1950s, *Adventures in Good Eating*, was not adventurous by contemporary culinary standards, it nevertheless encouraged a self-identified community to articulate its tastes, as subsequent listings were compiled and revised mostly by Hines’ readers. This “freemasonry of motorists” constructed a gastronomic geography of America in an era when cars, roads, and the spatial reorganization of work and leisure developed roadside dining into a foodway of tremendous cultural and economic power.

Yet, if a community authored these guidebooks, were Americans ever without direction in uncharted spaces or were they actively creating places? I argue that the figure of and activity surrounding Hines stem from the material and social shifts caused by the conjuncture of automobility and consumerism. Although three decades later these same historical trends aided the dissolution of Hines’ community, knowledge produced by this nexus of popular culture contributed to modern practices and discourses of culinary regionalism, fast food, and gourmet “tastemaking.” The relationship between this critic, his community, and the larger context of consumption are thus integral to understanding, rather than dismissing, the spatial and aesthetic history of American taste.



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For American motorists in the 1930s to 1950s the questions of where to eat and what to eat were intertwined. In this era, before he became synonymous with packaged cake mixes and frosting, Duncan Hines was the premier restaurant critic in the United States. He attempted to expertly speak about the entire nation's network of roads and restaurants by organizing these in a guidebook of recommendations for motorists under a principled gastronomy of American food. I argue that the conjuncture of cars and consumption surrounding Hines and his community informed their geographic view of food, and thus presents an example of how "the national can be entrenched in numerous symbolic, material, spatial, and habitual ways," as automobility turns these into a "constellation of factors that constitutes the national ... across popular culture and everyday life" and thus "sustains the sense of national belonging, anchoring the national in a grounded, everyday culture" of driving and eating.¹ If we assume that cuisines stem from communities who consume them, then the gastronomy of American food as based in regions is an outcome of the particular modern and mobile social activity made possible by the automobile.

At first visiting restaurants as a hobby, Hines' reputation spread through word-of-mouth communication amongst his fellow traveling salesmen. The flood of phone calls, notes, and queries for recommendations was tremendous to the point of ruinous; Hines' response was to codify his list, print it professionally, and distribute them through Hines' annual Christmas cards to friends, as well as anyone else who had asked for his advice. This did not stop the onslaught of requests but instead furthered his renown as well as the amount of requests pouring in to his home. By 1936 this led to Hines' self-published *Adventures in Good Eating*, a pocket-sized book that would sell hundreds of thousands of copies over the next twenty years.

Yet Hines' accumulation of knowledge did not happen by his efforts alone. During leisure trips and vacations "Hines and his wife swapped experience in good eating with other motorists," and thus "began to accumulate lists of restaurants which he exchanged with other people, and before he long he had achieved a minor-league

reputation as a connoisseur.”² That these motorists could swap “experience” was possible because they shared similar subject positions formed by history and really did meet each other on the roadside, striking up conversations amongst peers and exchanging information and building camaraderie.³ Specifically, this community of motorists experienced the privileges of being white and affluent, and thus car-owning and restaurant-affording. In other words, the phenomenon of motorists exchanging information was, in fact, privileged whites sharing the social and material spoils of their position in American society.⁴ As such, Hines’ “book literally sold itself at the beginning, with only word-of-mouth recommendations to push it along” within a relatively homogeneous community that communicated quickly and easily because of their similarities.⁵ Explicitly stated,

The Hines public consists largely of persons like Hines—middle aged, of substantial income, who travel for pleasure. They are accustomed to certain comforts. At the sight of antediluvian plumbing or gravy reminiscent of library paste their dispositions ruffle perceptibly. Hines feels it his sacred duty to protect his fellows.⁶

This initial audience of Hines—his friends, professional peers, and others of their class—constituted what Daniel Boorstin calls a “consumption community,” a group that “consists of people who have a feeling of shared well-being, shared risks, common interests and common concerns that come from consuming the same kinds of objects.”⁷ Hines’ consumption community was the “freemasonry of motorists,” the fellowship of Americans with similar interests who “recognize[d] in the book that started as a personal hobby a serviceable enterprise” in aiding hungry motorists.⁸ The community was similar to the very first American motorists: middle to upper-class white Americans who motored to find adventure in heretofore unseen territories and imagined their activities to be similar to settlers manifesting destiny across “new” land. They were, in Hines’ words, the “gasoline pilgrims whose main interest seemed to be the relative merits of inns” and “to whom the price of a meal is a minor consideration.”⁹

While at first relying on a small band of peers with which to trade restaurant recommendations, immediately after publishing the first edition of his guidebook Hines “realized he had to rely on others of like taste and temperament” to investigate new listings and check-up on old listings.¹⁰ Most were old friends though some were new contacts; “all of them have eaten and slept badly: many of them have done almost as much touring as Hines and are glad to contribute their information toward the correlating” of a guidebook.¹¹ Furthermore, Hines thought that only those “who had succeeded in life” in terms of high income and illustrious titles “could be trusted,” since such success was proof of their status as “honorable members of society” and owners of “superior tastes when it came to the finer things in life – such as good restaurants.”¹² Also, their personal wealth potentially could act as a shield against their opinion being bought by restaurateurs or even Hines himself; it also afforded them the chances to travel and eat widely and often. “They are not paid employees— ‘You can’t buy service like theirs’—but are acquaintances whose judgment in food he has found reliable,” said Marion Edwards, quoting Hines.¹³ For Hines, “without these assiduous volunteers ... the books would be out of the question” since it is the “several bank presidents, professors, corporate executives, all proud to be Hines’ checkers” that created the listings of recommendations.¹⁴ If, as Boorstin argues, the existence of “community requires a consciousness of a community,” then Hines’ volunteers qualified since “they regard[ed] *Adventures in Good Eating* not as Hines’ book, but as their communal own.”¹⁵

As to why motorists were seeking restaurant recommendations, by the 1930s automobiles had caused “the beginning of a major transformation in recreational habits,” for while “pleasure travel had previously been a rarity for most people, represented if at all by a brief annual vacation, but that such travel had become frequent and normal, whether the trip was a journey of some length or a brief ride on impulse.”¹⁶ As cultural geographer John Jakle argues, “the automobile popularized travel, spreading the advantages of tourism from society’s elite to the masses,” allowing more Americans to leave “the bounds of city and town and roam the countryside in search of nature, region, and history.”¹⁷ Touring by automobile developed

Americans sense of the country, allowing them to see places there at their own pace and on their own terms rather than through the tourism industry's system of railroads, mass-market accommodations, and a limited menu of packaged attractions. Furthermore, the car's much-hailed freedom of mobility fostered senses of nationalism amongst Americans as they encountered the historical sites, natural landscapes, and regional cultures perceived as symbolic of the diversity and distinction of America.¹⁸

Historian Warren Belasco argues that in the early 20th century, "in addition to encouraging deliberation, motoring heightened attention to topographic detail and regional variation," and thereby "cars broke the railroad's monopolistic hold over American geographic consciousness."¹⁹ Belasco also narrates that, after an initial stage of awe and discovery that ended in the 1920s, the dominant trend of American drivers was to prefer prescribed routes and regular roadside services.²⁰ Both of these processes were aided by Hines, for he was, in his words, "doing something for the traveler as nearly ideal as possible.... working out this experiment in service to those who appreciate the refinements of good living, while seeing America."²¹ As such, his guidebooks were "not intended to tell people living in a city where to eat in their home town, but the information therein is mighty convenient for anyone traveling in a strange territory."²² In fact, his publications were "a sort of Bible," for, as his contemporaries described, "motorists carry his guidebook as they do road maps."²³ In fact, Hines' work was a map of foodways layered over a map of the United States.

In his gastronomic memoir, Duncan Hines declared that his narrative "must be a geographical rather than a chronological rambling; it will have to follow the road map and not the calendar."²⁴ Hines' gastronomy of America glorified regional foodways that when drawn together as a national whole created what he considered to be an American cuisine. His ideal was what I call regionality, defined as the idea that each geographic region has unique food products and practices that symbolize it, and these are outcomes of the particular cultural communities and agricultural circumstances of each area. Within each region, his culinary hierarchies were made by judging

foods for their perceived seasonality, simplicity, and “common sense” practicality, principles that he believed would best preserve the authenticity of a product, its place, and its people.

Gastronomy and geography both have aspects of the real and the imaginary; both involve the physical relationship to land and the food that comes from it as well as the ideas we form around these things. To investigate his spatialized food philosophy we must respond to the questions of anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson: “how are spatial meanings established? Who has the power to make places of spaces?”²⁵ Geographer Philip Crang suggests “a plethora of social actors who potentially can be involved in the production and dissemination of this knowledge” of food in space, including “institutions, promotionalists, distributors and packagers, experts and other commentators such as journalists, and vitally of course variously positioned consumers.”²⁶ As one of these actors, Hines established idealizations of place by constituting them as areas in space whose unique articulations of culture and agriculture typify America. This view expands on Lawrence Grossberg’s theory “of the production of culture through a spatial becoming.”²⁷ Applied to Hines’ perspective on American food, when he defined and described the places from which foods originated, his making of place produced geographic knowledge, which in turn constituted food culture.

Marion Edwards surmised during his lifetime that “the basis for Hines’ belief that each region should emphasize and learn the possibilities of its own foods” was found in his childhood, wherein “most food served was home-grown or made from home-raised products.”²⁸ This informed Hines outlook, as he felt the first connection between a place and its food should be based in the specific agricultural products of the local land. Whatever grows best, in abundance, by season, and is more or less unique to that area should be highlighted in mind and on menus. As such, Hines believed “the best American cooking is regional cooking, and that is dependent upon the season when local specialties are available.”²⁹ This argument was born of practicality by virtue of proximity: “why should I stuff myself with chicken in California, when the whole Pacific Ocean, full of sea food, is right offshore?”³⁰ He repeatedly

complained that, "many inns and cafes in the smaller places might do much better if they would specialize in products near at hand. Why not utilize green corn, cream, eggs and cheese dishes, good chickens rather than tough steaks and meats that must come from a distance?"³¹

This type of gastronomy furthered the discourses of certain regional foodways, by often recommending dishes or ingredients that had been socially constructed as symbols of a place and/or its people. For instance, when "Hines urges his following to choose the food of the region" he did so by recommending "clams, lobsters and chowder in New England, soft-shelled crabs in Maryland, okra and shrimps in South Carolina, freshwater fish in the Great Lakes region, Spanish dishes in California and Texas, and so on."³² This pattern of identification of food with place was echoed in his food memoir, wherein Hines used ad-hoc botanical, historical, and personal anecdotal evidence to support his conceptions of regionality. Hines' even admitted at the end of his memoir that doing so was an act of creativity, not accuracy: "It is increasingly difficult to generalize about foods and our food habits, since both are changing so rapidly. We're a restless people, and as we move from place to place we take our habits with us, so that a strictly regional dinner is becoming a thing of the past."³³ Despite this acknowledgement he still proclaimed place-food combinations to further his argument for an American gastronomy and his community's material habits contributing to one.

Hines saw New England, and the Midwest as well, as the best symbols of his gastronomy. He believed that "the awakening to good food is most marked ... in New England, which is the best place in the United States to eat;" moreover, New England and "Midwestern cookery is like the land—solid, unadorned, and good; and, like the land, there is always plenty of it" in the form of "noble Old world dishes" retuned in America.³⁴ This fits the "image of midwestern food [as] meat and potatoes, home cooking, basic ingredients, and few spices or surprises," otherwise called "traditional, wholesome American food" with "an emphasis on hearty and filling foods; a conservative approach to new tastes and ingredients; and a pride in well-crafted, functional dishes that are economical and efficient."³⁵

This discourse and practice was a root of Hines' sense of simplicity, especially the conservative and utilitarian impulses he embedded within it. In fact, Hines' references to simplicity were connotative of other values that he felt were important in American gastronomy, like frugality and authenticity.

Yet, like geographic knowledges, "authenticity and naturalness [are] socially defined."³⁶ For an American touring by automobile, Hines staked the authenticity of New England, in particular Massachusetts, in its colonial and Revolutionary eras as echoed in its historical sites, vernacular architecture, and plain food. His reasons for judging New England's food as best typifying American gastronomy were as following: the food was "as simple and unadorned as any in America"; having "been settled longer than most of the country... New Englanders have a long heritage of fine cookery"; the use of cooking techniques made "New Englanders have fewer gastric disturbances and spend less time at the drugstore and the doctor's for that complaint than any other provincial group in the country;" and "that famous Yankee frugality" aids in finding and using ingredients.³⁷ Hines' selected the lobster as the symbol of New England's culinary practice of simplicity, history, seasonality, and frugality within the confines of their geography. In his words, "lobsters and New England are one and the same thing to anyone who appreciates good food" because in they were simple and historically linked to the area.³⁸ First, the settlers enjoyed them; second, they were argued to be unique to the area; and third, they were prepared in the simplest ways possible (e.g. merely boiling without extra ingredients).³⁹

Hines' use of lobster as a symbol of authenticity falls into a common "culinary fakelore," a mythology built around a food and its accompanying foodway through rhetorics varying somewhat by context.⁴⁰ The intent of such myth making, though, is invariably to elevate the food and foodway to the service of an ideology. In relation to this process in popular culture, John Storey defines ideology as, "discourses which attempt to impose closure on meaning in the interests of power to make what is cultural (i.e. made) appear natural."⁴¹ In just this manner, as George H. Lewis has proven,

the significance of the lobster ... was crafted more by literate summer visitors who had adopted the state and saw in the lobster a symbol of uniqueness than it was by local residents, who saw lobsters traditionally as a low-status food item but one that was now, due to outside demand and heavy fishing, becoming both scarcer and higher-priced.⁴²

Hines was exactly of the former type, an affluent tourist who came to Maine and lobsters through the advice of other affluent motor-ing tourists. Together, they were a class-based community of socially and economically powerful consumers that, through their knowledge production as codified in Hines' guides, re-made the lobster into an increasingly rare commodity and symbol of high status, erasing its history as an abundant and cheap food for the mostly working-class poor population of Maine. Hines' gastronomy exemplified this, showing, first, how foodstuffs are polyvalent symbols and, consequently, how then "foodways help mark existing social boundaries and, depending upon one's viewpoint and focus, inclusion within or exclusion from a group."⁴³ Hines took part in naturalizing the lobster by representing it as Maine essentialized and commodified by and for the powerful tourist.

This process of finding the most authentic foods as served by restaurants best representing their region was repeated through out the dozens of editions of Hines' guidebooks. In sum, he believed that America, as he and his community experienced through the windshields of the cars and the tastes of their class, had a cuisine constituted by its diversity. Food scholar Sidney Mintz argues against such an overarching definition of American cuisine that synthesizes disparate foodways.. He feels that attempts to collect regional cuisines and present them as constituting American cuisine when drawn together are false since "variety does not equal a cuisine, and is not the same as a cuisine," for "*regional* cuisines [are] the only 'real' cuisines, anyways," and thus "national cuisines are not cuisines in the same sense."⁴⁴ National cuisines are not cuisines because Mintz does

not see how a cuisine can exist unless there is a community of people who eat it, cook it, have opinions about it, and engage

in dialogue involving those opinions. This is not to say that people cannot debate the merits of various restaurant renderings ... but that is not the same as having a cuisine.⁴⁵

Mintz assumes that such a community can only be of intimate neighbors who live in the same geographically-restricted social and material context and perform commensality in non-commercial settings.

In contrast, the work of Duncan Hines was an attempt to start the community-based discussion that, in Mintz's definition, is constitutive of cuisine. Instead of a community bound by place of origin, tied by history and shared local culture, and unadulterated by commerce, Hines attempted to organize a geographically far-flung but socially homogeneous community who, by virtue of their automobility and consumption habits, would share similar social and material relationships to American foods and foodways. These relationships are highly modern, in the sense that they are made by technologies that aid in traversing time and space, and for this reason Mintz rejects such a cuisine formation because this type of community formation is wholly different—arguably opposite of—the classic development of regional foodways in pre-modern eras of isolation and impoverishment. Yet Hines' discourse and practice of modern American gastronomy persists, found in the contemporary social scenes of “foodies.” Made operative by the power of their social positions, their own discourse and practice of consumption further notions of authenticity and simplicity that appear built into the imaginative geography of American food.⁴⁶

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Notes

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- 4 My inquiries and conclusions emerge parallel to Cotten Seiler's, in that his "own archival research on early automobility in the United States... furnished virtually no documentary evidence of a widespread awareness of driving as a privilege of whiteness—though of course it was.... This historical vacuum can be partially attributed to the ways in which white supremacy was a discourse both commonsensical (therefore not in need of explication) and logically tenuous (therefore deliberately hidden from scrutiny)." Cotten Seiler, "The Significance of Race to Transport History," *The Journal of Transport History* 28. 2 (2007): 308.
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 - 20 Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 71-173.
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- 29 MacKaye, "Where Shall We Stop for Dinner?," 81.
- 30 Duncan Hines, and Frank J. Taylor, "How to Find a Decent Meal," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 26, 1947, 100.
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- 32 Taylor, "America's Gastronomic Guide," 17.
- 33 Hines, *Duncan Hines' Food Odyssey*, 242.
- 34 Taylor, "America's Gastronomic Guide," 17.; Hines, *Duncan Hines' Food Odyssey*, 129, 131.
- 35 Lucy M. Long, "Green Bean Casserole and Midwestern Identity: A Regional Foodways Aesthetic and Ethos," *Midwestern Folklore* 33. 1 (2007): 32, 39-40.
- 36 Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 211. Peterson outlines the varying senses of authenticity as meaning authenticated, not pretense; original, not fake; relic, not changed; authentic reproduction, not kitsch; credible in current context; and/or real, not imitative.
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- 45 Ibid., 117.
- 46 See Betty Fussell, *I Hear America Cooking: The Cooks and Recipes of American Regional Cuisine* (New York: Penguin, 1997).; John L. and Karen Hess Hess, *The Taste of America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).; Jane and Michael Stern Stern, *Roadfood: Eat Your Way across the USA* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997). Like Hines, the Sterns investigate restaurants by automobile, judging authenticity through a similar framework of regional authenticity and homey simplicity, and publishing nearly twenty volumes of their opinion.