

The Way We Eat

The Melting Pot: It has been said that America is a melting pot. To understand this ideology let us first define the term “melting pot.” Merriam-Webster defines it as, “A place where a variety of races, cultures or individuals assimilate into a cohesive whole.” Lexico.com by Oxford adds an industrial definition, saying, “A pot in which metals or other materials are melted and mixed.” In cooking terms, a melting pot would be used to create fondues, sauces or broths by melding multiple flavors together through a slow-cooking process resulting in a new flavor profile which is an amalgamation of separates becoming one. Speaking of amalgamations, in business an amalgamation is where two companies are liquidated, the assets are paid out to claimants and a new entity is formed out of the two liquidated companies. A particular feature present in all of these definitions is that the identity of each original item is lost in the process of creating a new “unified” product. The result is a monochromatic entity in which the essence of the original characters’ contributions is there. What is absent however, is the tangible presence of the contributing parties themselves. In the case of the culinary melting pot, we chefs have a way of somewhat correcting this issue. For soups we use garnishes. That being said, they are more complex than say, an herb sprig strategically laid on top. Let’s say I want to do a modern riff on a classic soup like clam chowder. I may present it as such: Creamy Clam Broth with a Potato-Clam Fritter, Bacon Lardons and Cracked Pepper. The broth has a homogeneous taste, texture and visual profile. To add character and to include the “expected elements” I present the clam and potato components on top in the form of a fritter, to be seen and enjoyed as almost a separate experience from the broth. This approach actually has a fantastic affect with food. It does become a problem however, when we attempt to apply it to people in society. It results in a scenario in which we make visible certain figures like Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King, jr and Rosa Parks but leave out people like Dr. Charles Drew (blood plasma innovator), Garrett Morgan (traffic light and gas mask innovator), Katherine Johnson (mathematician for NASA), etc. All of whom made contributions that shaped life as we know it. Obviously the first three people I mentioned need to be learned about in school, but the latter three among others should be included in the American lexicon of learning. This “garnishing” approach in my opinion creates a situation where two or three prominently recognized individuals characterize the entire bowl of soup while the rest of the members of a race’s history just fade into the “monochromatic, one dimensional broth.” Occasionally, if our stomachs can handle it, we even drizzle on some hot sauce in the form of teaching about Malcolm X.

The Tossed Salad: There is another way of viewing our society. America can be characterized as a salad bowl. A salad bowl is similar to a melting pot in the fact that it is a vessel in which various ingredients are combined to create a new composite product. The salad bowl does differ in one major way of course. All of the original ingredients come together while continuing to maintain their individual identities. There are various types of salads, each one operating on a different culinary principal. For instance, we can make what is called a marinated salad. The overarching principal here is to create an acidic dressing that when combined with firm, crisp ingredients, it slowly softens the structure of those ingredients while drawing flavor out of them.

It is designed to marinate, making it softer and more flavorful over time. Cole slaw or tomato cucumber salad would be examples of this. We also have pasta salad (which is technically a subset of marinated salad). Obviously, it must contain pasta as the main ingredient. This salad needs a less acidic dressing so as not to create mushy pasta. Perhaps the most common variety of salad though, is a greens salad in which any combination of lettuces (greens) is used as the base. These different classifications of salads would be the equivalent of the different types of governmental structures throughout the world. Just as a greens salad must include some type of greens in it, a marketplace style of government for instance, must also have certain characteristics that allow it to be called a marketplace system. As for our salad, after meeting certain criteria, the sky is the limit for what ingredients are added to the mix. However, it must be noted that whatever ingredients are added will inevitably determine the characteristics of the salad. There is an infinite number of ingredient combinations that can give your salad an infinite number of personalities. America, with all of its subtle and not so subtle nuances, does have a particular personality which we can control at any time. Still perhaps the most valuable element of salad making is something called juxtaposition. This is the act of placing two or more seemingly unfamiliar things together in the context of a single operation and allowing them to work together. The operation actually thrives *because* of their differences, not *in spite* of them. When first learning to cook professionally, I learned how to match similar flavors. I even started figuring out how to recreate the flavor of one item by substituting other items. After a while what I began to notice was that I was doing a little too good of a job at matching flavors. My food was coming out “flat.” What it needed was a balance created by flavors with opposite profiles. Everyone knows that fresh watermelon is delicious. Everyone also knows that if you add salt to it, it becomes irresistible. The savory notes of the salt work with the sweetness of the watermelon to produce a totally new flavor dynamic without obscuring the flavor or texture of either item.

Socially and politically, the American experience has evolved into a tossed salad where I may find myself as a piece of lettuce surrounded by neighbors resembling tomato, onion, maybe crouton and even some shredded cheese. I also have some neighbors that are lettuce just as I am. That is to say, they look and behave just like me. They have the same flavor as me. Our society thrives on the fact that we have so many different “ingredients” within our borders.

Yet, an exceedingly important factor in our “salad bowl” society isn’t so noticeable at a glance. How the ingredients were sourced and how they were cultivated has a significant, lasting effect on the person experiencing our society. If the tomato was cultivated using pesticides, then there will be a negative effect in the long term. If the onion was grown organically, then it will have an inherent ability to bless the person consuming it. There is even a movement called “The 100 Mile Diet” in which people challenge themselves to only consume food that has been grown and source from within 100 miles of where they are eating it. The idea is that less fuel has been burned to transport the ingredients as well as no artificial substances have been added to preserve it during a shorter transport. Understanding our ingredients, how they were cultivated and where they came from all play a large role in how we eat these days. By the same token, we must take the time to learn our neighbors. We need to not just judge each other from afar. Let us study how each other was raised, where each other comes from. I was adopted at a young age and raised in a military family, so I was kind of a citizen of the world early in life. On one hand, it caused me

to be open to people who are different from me. I am very comfortable with learning about different customs, cultures, foods, traditions, etc. On the other hand, I get restless very easily and it's hard for me to create deep relationships. I'm also prone to change which is a blessing and a curse. Another aspect of my cultivation is that I grew up in a mixed-race family. My dad is black, my mom is white. As a brown-skinned young man with parents of two opposite races I found no problem befriending people of either race. You could say the juxtaposition of my parents caused a certain balance in me. So, to me, things like racism make absolutely no sense. As children of a military family, my brother, my sister and I saw interracial marriages everywhere we went. The military is full of people who have met someone from halfway around the world and decided to make it work. Food-wise, I literally grew up eating collard greens for dinner one night, shepherd's pie the next night, lasagna the next and burgers the next! We ate no one nationality of food in our house. All that being said, I have had to acknowledge that everyone didn't grow-up the way I did. I simply do not understand limiting my sphere of influence to only people that look like me, but a lot of people *were* raised that way. I am forced to realize that some of my neighbors simply respond out of the environment in which they were cultivated. I meet some who were born literally within 100 miles of where they currently live. Others were raised thousands of miles from here. Yet we all have found ourselves as neighbors. We must learn to look at our differences as reasons to get to know one another. Our differences serve as areas to grow in directions we have yet known.

The final characteristic about our great salad bowl society is the dressing. I would say this is the most vital component of all. It's the tie that binds, if you will. The salad dressing is the element that brings all of the ingredients together. It is itself a conglomeration of ingredients that have been combined in a way so as to hold everything else together. A basic vinaigrette for example, has a structure which creates balance. When making a vinaigrette, it requires 3 parts fat to 1 part acid. This ratio allows for a synergy between the two opposing members. The third part of a vinaigrette is the aromatics; garlic, ginger, herbs, etc. The aromatics, along with the type of acid selected (typically vinegar or citrus juice) create the character which will cause all of the other ingredients in the salad to work together. A good vinaigrette accents the similarities of the different members. We chefs call it "building a bridge" between ingredients.

The Flag: As a country with such a diverse population of ingredients, we naturally exhibit differing views on a wide array of topics. There are few topics that starkly divide our nation like the topic of kneeling before the American flag during the playing of the National Anthem. One side says it is a disgrace to all of the people that have fought and continue to fight to defend the flag. They believe that standing to attention during the playing of the National Anthem is a show of solidarity to the "*republic for which the flag stands.*" Others say kneeling in silence is the ultimate sign of respect. A way of respectfully placing a demand on the "*liberty and justice for all*" that the flag represents. This division is even present among Christians.

When dealing with issues like this it is important to realize that we are a nation founded on Christian principles. That matters for one *very* important reason. It determines how we respond to one another in the face of adverse differences. Proper Christianity is that perfect vinaigrette that holds all of us "ingredients" together by drawing on our similarities. "People needing a

Savior” becomes our common identity. In the Bible, God is known by different identities; that is to say, He is known by several different names. It’s an indication that He is many things to us at many different times, in many different situations. One of His names is Jehovah Nissi, meaning “God is my banner.” A banner represents a few things. The most obvious thing is that a banner denotes who someone represents. If I am in a foreign country and I see a limousine drive by with American flags flying on the hood, I can be sure that there is someone representing the United States of America in that car. A banner also shows who we support. If I wave a banner with the logo of my favorite sports team, it shows that I am one of those who supports that particular team. But a banner can also give instruction. A few years ago, I ran in a few 5k races. Right before the start of each race all of us runners gathered under the giant banner that simply read, “START.” It was an instruction on where we should gather to begin our run. We all figured out when to *stop* running because after 3.1 miles we came across another giant banner that read “FINISH.” Even if there was no one else running in the race, if there was no crowd to follow, I would have known where to start and where to stop based on the banners I passed under. We can always know how to respond to others if we simply remember which banner we march under. This is where we sometimes tend to stumble. Let’s call it a conundrum of “Nation versus Nurture.” In our society we highly value the concept of the “Good Samaritan.” Believers and non-believers alike are inspired when we hear stories of people doing good deeds toward one another. Many American believers know, and many American non-believers are completely unaware, that the concept of the good Samaritan was introduced by Christ Himself. In the 10th chapter of The Book of Luke, He tells a story in response to a man asking Him whom he should consider to be his neighbor. In other words, he wanted to know who should be considered that opposite ingredient next to him in the salad bowl. The story goes as follows:

“³⁰A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Here is a point that often times seems to be missing when believers and non-believers reference this scenario. The Jews and the Samaritans were bitter enemies. Their countries were at war with one another. What this means is that the Samaritan had to look past a national allegiance and see the humanity that was needed. It’s not a message we tend to want to promote these days. It’s not

in the spirit of macho bravado. There is no pomp and circumstance. The Samaritan doesn't sneer at the Jewish man and tell him he must have gotten what he deserved. But what it is, it's the words of the One we claim to serve. It's the instruction from the banner under which we say we march. Our responses to one another become a lot more edifying when we remember which banner represents us. We should always be proud of the nation God has borne us into, but that national pride should never eclipse the light from God. No flag, not even the American flag, flies above the banner of Christ's love. As we move forward being one nation under God, may we remember to be cautious concerning the diet we consume. Let us choose to feed on the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, against which there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23). It is a diet that most certainly will nourish us and give us strength to follow the commandment of Christ:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

~J.S.E.~