

food/drink

# History of Food and Drink in the Western United States

Presented by Culture Talk

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# Native American Cuisine

In general, Native American cuisine prior to European colonization can be characterized by the “Three Sisters”: corn (maize), squash, and beans. While these three crops were grown in some form throughout all of North America before 1492, western American cuisine in particular could be broken down into the following subgroups:

- Western Cuisine:

- Native American tribes in the Northwest and modern-day California were typically hunter-gatherers.
- Fishermen of northwestern tribes like the Salish and Tlingit crafted wooden traps, spears, and nets to catch fish, which were the main source of meat in these regions. Other hunters used snares and bows and arrows to hunt more sources of meat, especially ducks, rabbits, and deer.
- Gatherers typically collected mushrooms and berries in order to add more variety to the cuisine. Because of the mild climate in this region, most food could be grown year-round, rather than seasonally.

- Southwestern Cuisine:

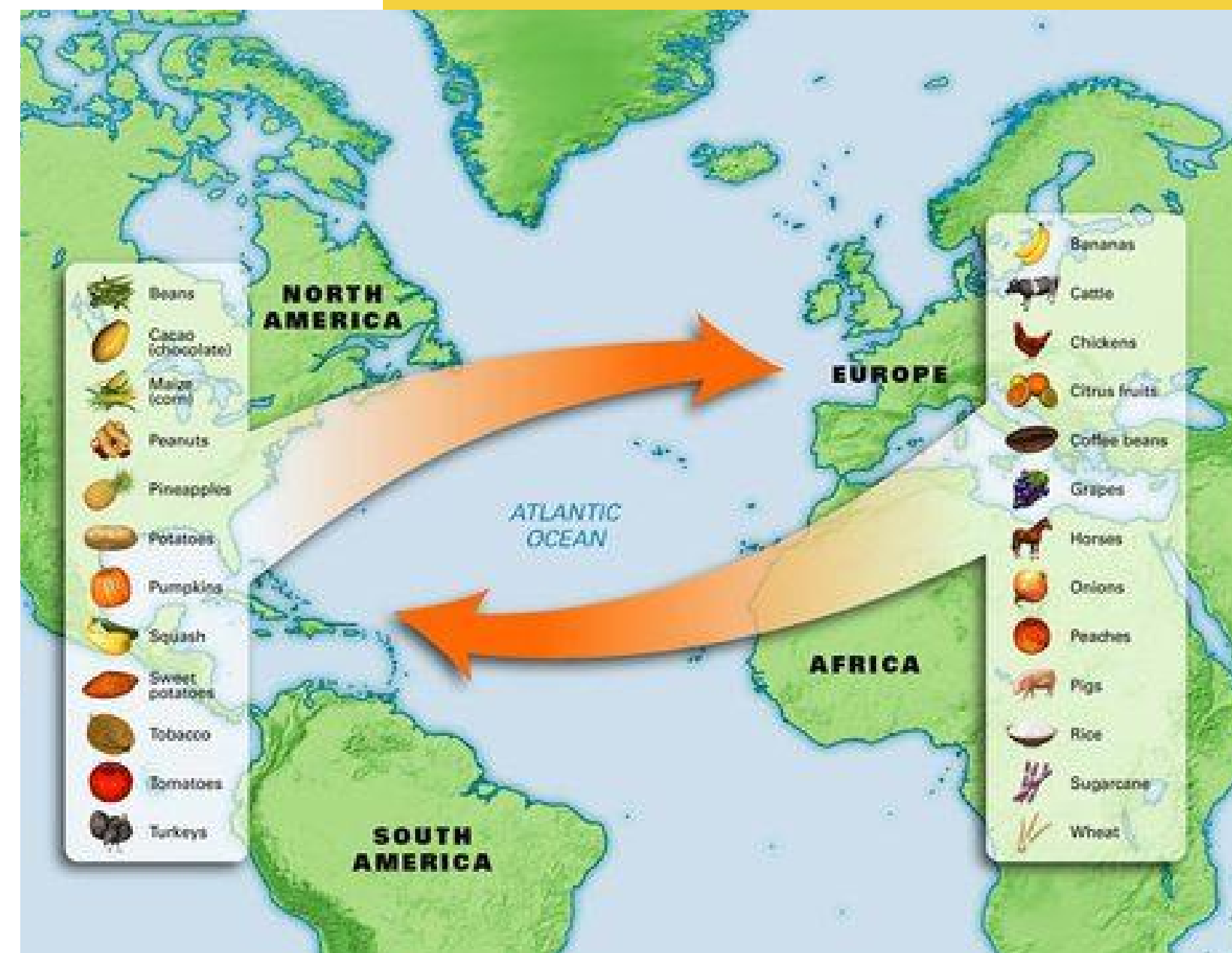
- Tribes of the Southwest, such as the Hopi, Navajo, and Pueblo, used advanced farming techniques, such as crop rotation and irrigation, to grow the “Three Sisters” crops, nuts, seeds, and various other crops. These advanced farming techniques allowed Southwestern tribes to consistently have a food surplus, which was stored and preserved in clay pots.
- Fishermen and hunters in Southwestern Native American tribes used practices similar to those in the Northwest to obtain their main sources of meat: trout, deer, and rabbits. Turkeys were also eventually domesticated as sources of food.

# Cuisine After European Colonization

1492–1800s

After the Europeans colonized America, traditional cuisines began to evolve due to the Columbian Exchange--the exchange of goods between the Old World (Europe and Africa) and the New World (the Americas).

- On their trips to the Americas, Europeans brought previously unknown crops and animals to western America, permanently altering the main cuisines of this region:
  - Europeans introduced sheep, goats, and pigs to several parts of the Americas. All of these animals became new sources of meat used in western American cuisine.
  - Europeans also brought a variety of crops, such as bananas and wheat, to the Americas. Many tribes in western American began to grow these crops, as well as the traditional ones, as sources of food. These foods later became staples of western American cuisine.





Early 1800s

# Early Pioneer Cuisine



Western American cuisine stayed fairly consistent until the 19th century when American pioneers began migrating westwards.

- Early pioneer dishes mainly involved nonperishable items that the pioneers had brought with them from the East:
  - Common ingredients during this time included dried beans, cornmeal, rice, flour, sugar, and dried fruits.
  - The main source of meat was the animals that were brought on the journey, such as pigs, cows, and chickens.
  - Common drinks during this time were coffee and fresh milk from the cows.





# Early Pioneer Cuisine: Typical Meals for a Day



Breakfast: Cornmeal, pancakes, and beans with coffee



Noon meal: Piece of meat (beef, pork, or chicken) with milk



Evening meal: Stew and bread with fresh butter



# Pioneer and Cowboy Cuisine

Early 1800s

After the pioneers were able to properly settle in the West, western American cuisine evolved into a blend of dishes that the pioneers had brought from the East and the traditional dishes of the Native Americans and Spanish that had been living in the West for centuries.

- Over time, the pioneers became more comfortable with using meats that were native to western America in their dishes, such as **deer** and **buffalo**. Although the meals centered around meat, native crops to the region, such as **corn** and **pinto beans**, began to be used in pioneer cooking to create hearty, filling meals for cowboys.



Chuck Wagon Brisket, a Cowboy favorite



Mid-1800s

## Gold Rush Cuisine



When the California Gold Rush began in 1848, numerous saloons and boarding houses were built to feed the influx of miners into the state. Even though only 8% of the Gold Rush population consisted of women, the traditional homemakers at the time, early gold miners had little difficulty obtaining meals. At the time, the cost of daily staples like beans and coffee was low and the gold was plentiful, so the miners could afford to buy filling meals at cheap eateries.

- Common foods served at boarding houses and saloons included roast beef, eggs, potatoes, stews, and oysters.



Mid-1800s

# Gold Rush Cuisine



Over time, as an increasing number of Californians shifted their focus from agriculture to mining, most of the food in California had to be imported (mainly from the neighboring state of Oregon), resulting in a significant increase in the prices of foods.

- Most miners focused on buying quick, cheap meals at crude boarding houses and saloons, since they could not cook their own meals, which mostly consisted of **sourdough bread**--a dish that became a staple of Gold Rush cuisine. Miners who could afford more food typically ate mutton, potatoes, and beans in addition to sourdough bread. Tea and whiskey were beverages enjoyed by poor and wealthy miners alike.
- The wealthiest miners could afford to eat more nutritious meals consisting of a variety of fruits and vegetables, such as cherries, tomatoes, broccoli, mushrooms, and spinach.







Source: saveur.com

# Gold Rush Cuisine: Hangtown Fry

Hangtown Fry was a staple dish of Gold Rush cuisine created at a boarding house in Placerville, California.

Find an authentic recipe for Hangtown Fry at:

<https://whatscookingamerica.net/History/HangtownFryHistory.htm>



# Influence of Chinese Immigration

Mid-1800s

The California Gold Rush attracted many Asian immigrants, mostly those from China, to the western United States during the mid-19th century. Many of these immigrants later became builders of the first transcontinental railroad. During these periods of Chinese immigration, Chinese dishes began to influence western American cuisine.

- Due to the large influx of Chinese immigrants into California, especially San Francisco, during the 1850s, numerous Chinese grocery stores, selling items like **dried fish**, **dried ducks**, and **ginger**, began to open in California. As a result, Chinese immigrants were able to prepare traditional Chinese dishes and serve them in restaurants.





# Influence of Chinese Immigration

Mid-1800s

- Chinese restaurants in California, especially in San Francisco, quickly gained popularity during this time because the food was cheap, but clean and tasty, and the hospitality found in these restaurants was uncommon in other eateries in America.
  - Chinese restaurants during the mid-19th century relied on imported noodles, bamboo shoots, bean sprouts, and sauces to create their dishes. Because restaurant owners noticed that western Americans at the time preferred meat over vegetables, they incorporated a greater amount of meat, particularly **beef** and **chicken**, to their dishes than was traditional in China. In fact, one of the most popular Chinese-American dishes in western America, chop suey, was crafted by Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century to appeal to a larger American audience.
- During this time, traditionally Chinese cooking techniques, such as **stir frying**, and foods, such as **cabbage** and **bean sprouts**, began to be used in homes throughout the western United States due to the influence of Chinese immigrants.



Chop Suey



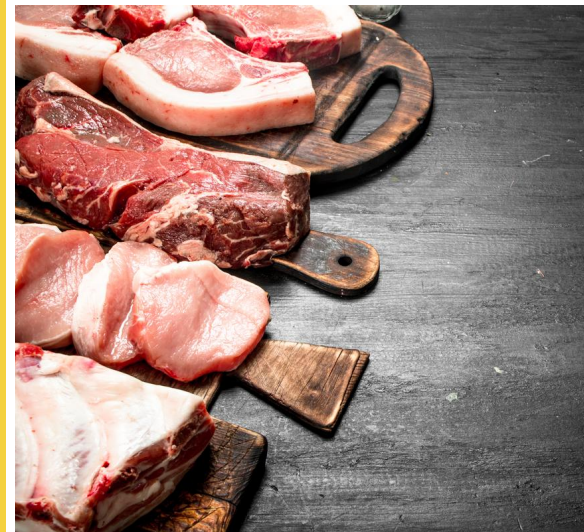


1860s & 1870s

## Old West Cuisine

During the 1860s and 1870s, most westerners ate at saloons serving the “Basic Four B’s”: beans, beef, bacon, and biscuits.

- Most western Americans at this time used food as a source of nourishment, not flavor. As a result, the saloons often served large amounts of the “Four B’s” without any seasoning or sauces as their main dishes. Onions were commonly used as a side dish and coffee was the main drink served at these saloons.
  - In much of the Southwest, the only fruits and vegetables that could be used in dishes were strawberries, squash, and corn.



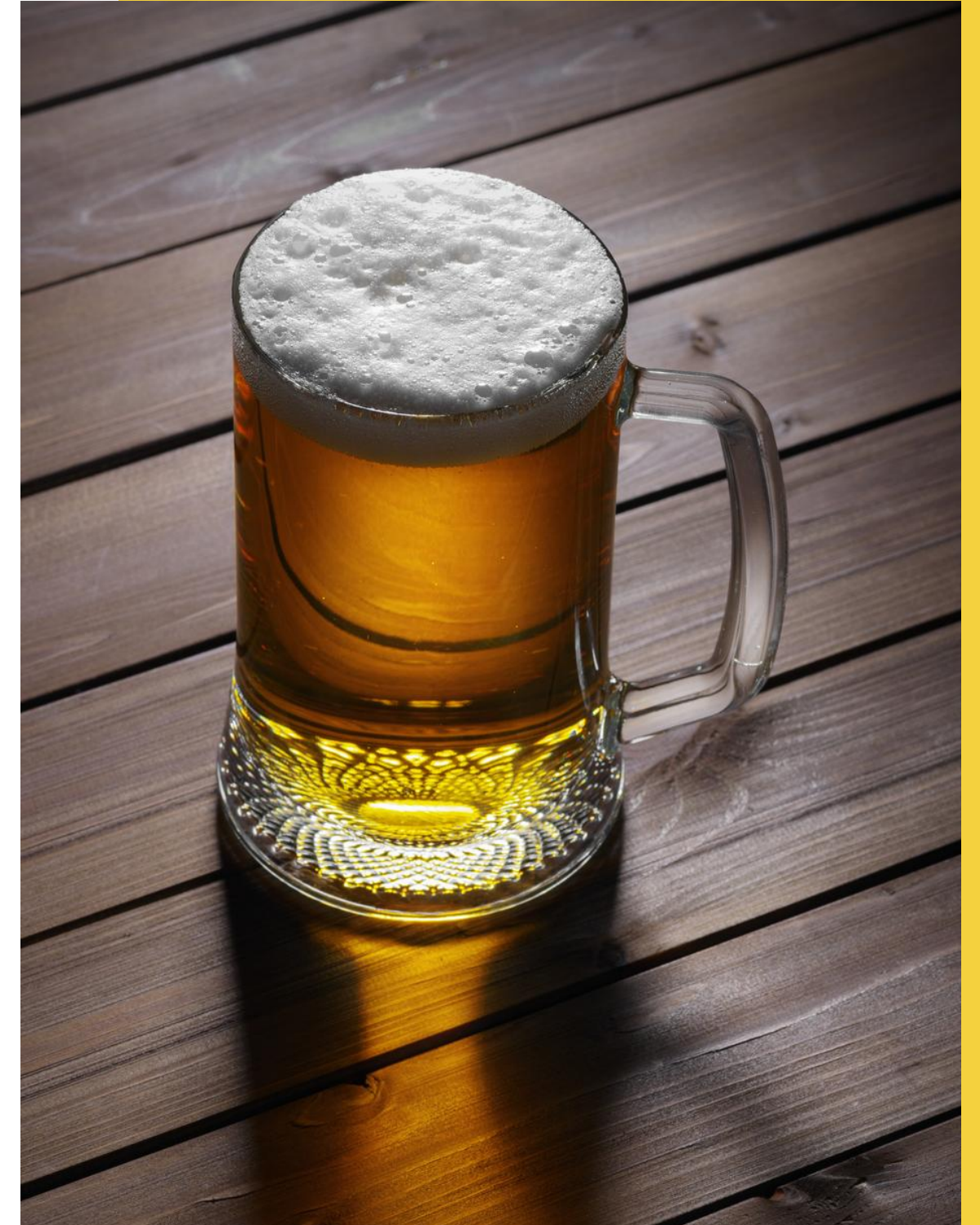


# Free Lunch Era

1880–1920

In the 1880s, the concept of “free lunch” began to increase in popularity throughout western America, especially in the saloons.

- Free lunches were an assortment of foods, varying in complexity, served to saloon customers at no cost. The expectation was that any customer who ate a free lunch would first buy at least one drink.
  - Saloon-keepers continued to make profits even while serving free lunches because customers typically revisited free lunch saloons after their first visit and ended up purchasing numerous alcoholic beverages and a full meal during each visit.
- With the emergence of the Temperance Movement and Prohibition in 1920, saloons serving free lunches shut down and the free lunches that encouraged people to purchase alcoholic beverages lost their purpose.





# Free Lunch Era: Examples of Free Lunch Foods



Pretzels and other salty snacks that produced an appetite for drinks



Clam chowder



Sausages and cheese



A variety of sandwiches



Dill pickles



Cold roast beef



# Influence of Mexican Immigration



Corn tortilla



Flour tortilla

During the 1920s, there was a large influx of immigrants from Mexico into the western United States. These immigrants brought with them traditional Mexican recipes that strongly influenced modern western American cuisine.

- Initially, traditional Mexican recipes, such as those for **corn tortillas**, were only enjoyed by the Mexican–American community. But by 1947, when new **hard-shell tacos** and **flour tortillas** started being mass-produced, Mexican foods quickly became more popular in western American households from all backgrounds.



# Influence of Mexican Immigration



Ground beef is the most commonly used meat in Tex-Mex



- As Mexican food began to grow in popularity, an increasing number of people in the West began to attempt to make Mexican foods in their own homes using the most convenient ingredients: Texan beef and flour tortillas.
- At the time, Mexican restaurant owners, having realized that most Americans preferred beef (an uncommon ingredient in traditional Mexican food) in their dishes, also began to craft spins on traditional Mexican recipes in order to cater to a wider audience.

These factors resulted in the creation of a new western American–Mexican fusion cuisine: Tex-Mex.



1920s–Present

# Influence of Mexican Immigration: Tex-Mex

According to Thrillist, Tex-Mex cuisine can be distinguished from traditional Mexican cuisine due to its use of the following ingredients that are uncommon in Mexico:

- Black beans
- Yellow cheese
- Wheat flour
- Beef
- Canned vegetables
- Cumin

The popularity of Tex-Mex cuisine in the West led to the creation of new branches of western American-Mexican fusion cuisines, like Cal-Mex (known for fish tacos), New Mex-Mex (known for chile sauces and corn tortillas), and Sonoran Mex (known for the chimichanga).

These spins on Mexican dishes are now staples of western American cuisine.



# Popular Tex-Mex Dishes



Chili con carne



Beef barbacoa



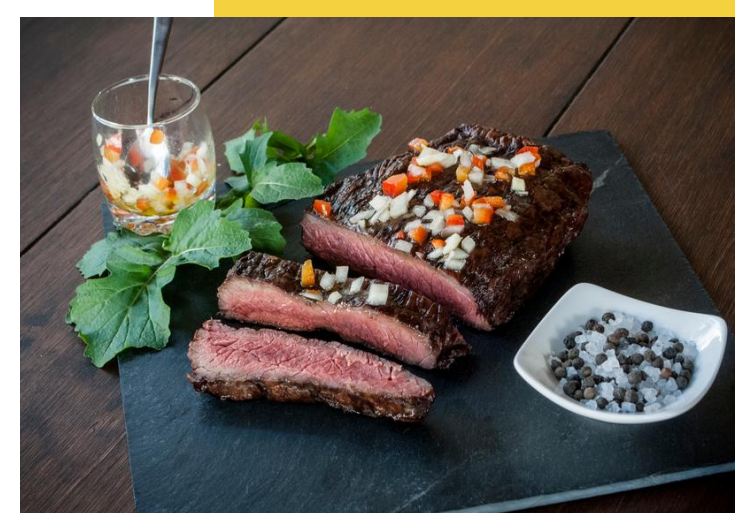
Nachos



Refried beans



Fajitas



Carne asada

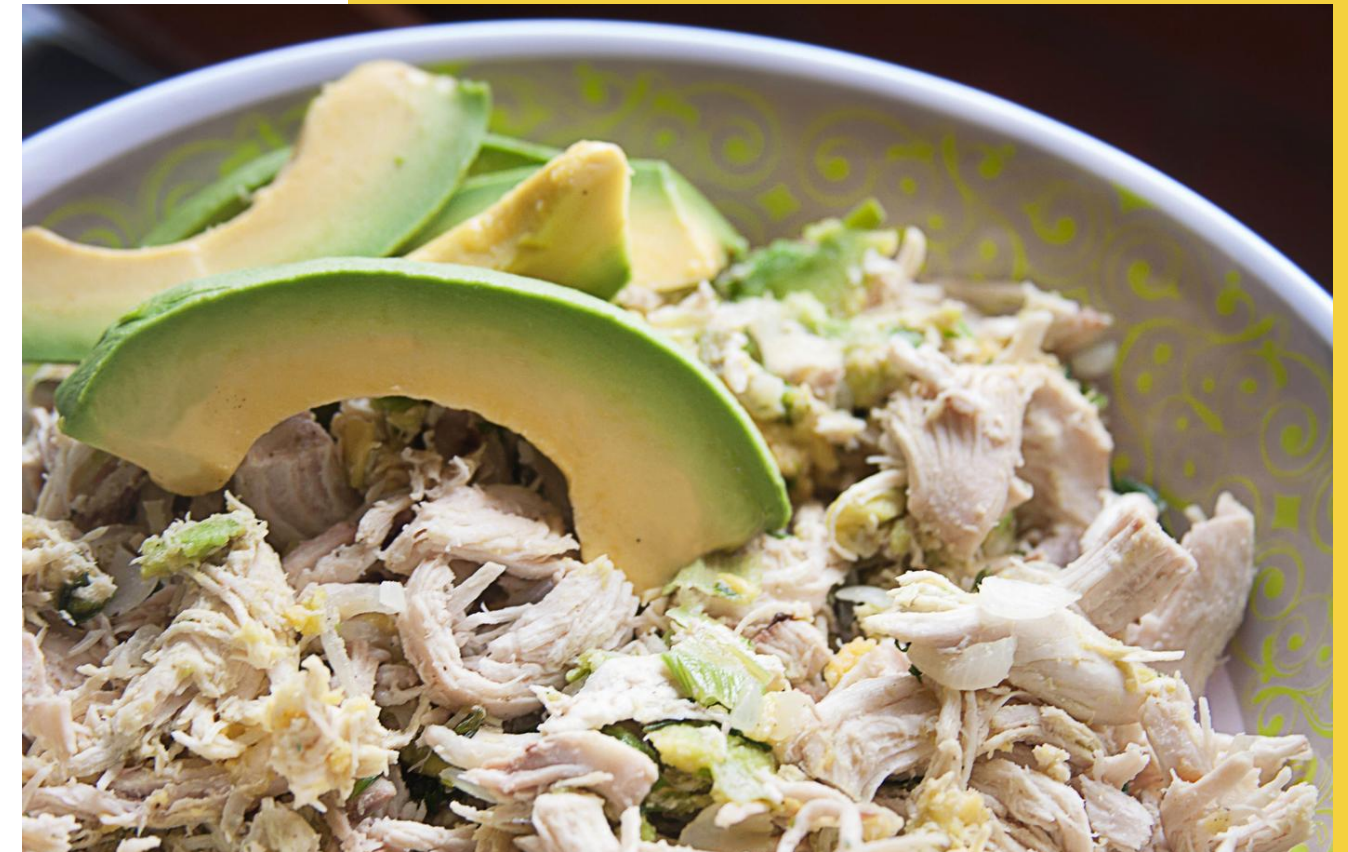


# Modern Western American Cuisine

Present

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, western Americans became more health-conscious, so the cuisine also became lighter and healthier.

- An increasing number of western Americans started adopting plant-based diets and became vegetarians (those who do not consume meat) and vegans (those who do not consume animal products).



Chicken and turkey are often used as lighter meat alternatives





# Popular Foods in Modern Western American Cuisine



Rocky Mountain  
oysters



Burritos



Hot dogs



Poke



Sushi



French fries and  
fry sauce













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