The political ideas that pushed Americans to rebel were not necessarily unique. The English, French and Germans all embraced some version of the republican thought that inspired American revolutionary fervor. Americans, however, were the only people to make it a mainstream ideology and use it to fight a revolution.

Why? Because, unlike any other nation in the world at the time, more Americans owned their land, worked it and produced their own food on it. This idea might seem simple to us today, but in 1776 it was profoundly important in shaping the identity of what it meant to be American. It was no coincidence that, during the Revolutionary years, such food as home-brewed beer, Indian corn pancakes, buckwheat bread and “patriotic cake” became forms of political expression. The kitchen became a crucible of revolutionary ferment.

Americans quickly realized that one way they could distinguish themselves from the Mother Country, and Europe as a whole, was by emphasizing the fact that they never had to import their own food. This was worth fighting over. This made republican ideology look pretty appealing to thousands of colonists.

American food
There is a distinctly “American” way of eating. Unlike other national cuisines, American food has little to do with the ingredients used and everything to do with the way we
think about our food as a cultural expression and the values with which we imbue our food.

American food defines itself through specific qualities such as its tolerance, openness, willingness to experiment, diversity, pragmatism and lack of pretension. We have historical explanations for all of these qualities. Developments such as the interaction between white settlers and Native Americans, slavery, the presence of a vast frontier in colonial America, an unprecedented emphasis on regional cultures, and the adoption of a political ideology with uniquely democratic potential all played important roles in shaping American food, and it’s a shape that still holds today.

Slavery and food
We know that slaves were integral to the southern economy, but they were critical to northern urban economies as well. New York City, for example, had a population that was 25 percent slave in 1775. West Africans did not forget their cultures or culinary habits when they were forcibly removed from their homeland.

Conditions in America, moreover, were such that slaves often had an unusual opportunity to replicate their diet in the new world. Planters often calculated that it was cheaper to allow slaves to cultivate their own diet rather than provide it themselves. This simple but critical decision – to give slaves a plot of land – proved to have a dramatic impact on American food, which readily incorporated yams, okra, black-eyed peas, sweetbreads, a variety of peppers, guinea corn, and, perhaps most important, a way of cooking that relied heavily on stewing food for long periods of time.

Conditions in the South were such that whites frequently followed the culinary lead of blacks, counterintuitive as that seems. This is an excellent example of Americans’ tolerance for new ways of eating. It was a tolerance often borne of necessity – trying to make a life in a new world – but it was a tolerance nonetheless.

Native Americans
Native Americans were perhaps even more critical in shaping notions of American food. On the frontier of a new world, white settlers quickly found themselves dependent on Native Americans for everything, especially food.

Americans quickly realized that one way they could distinguish themselves from the Mother Country, and Europe as a whole, was by emphasizing the fact that they never had to import their own food.

Corn is the most obvious example of natives shaping American eating habits. Everyone was soon eating corn, whether they wanted to or not. This was a spectacular thing to do, in a way, because by the 17th century, the English considered Indian corn a crop you fed to pigs. Thus, the adjustment to eating Indian corn was a huge one, and one that speaks powerfully to the adaptive nature of American food.

A major problem that whites had to overcome, however, was not only the cultural associations of eating this “savage” food “fit for swine,” but also the fact that it was Native American women who produced the corn. The English saw this as an abandonment of what every man was supposed to practice, husbandry. And when Indian men dove into the woods to hunt for weeks on end, the English settlers mistakenly saw this as an abandonment of responsibility, as hunting was considered a sport. Real men, as the English saw it, domesticated their protein source.

Despite these problems, however, the colonists had no choice but to adopt corn into their diets, as well as hunting game when domesticated meat ran low. Rarely were whites pleased with these developments – many wanted to preserve English standards – but again, the historical conditions dictated adjustment, and the colonists, for better or worse, rose to the challenge with a sense of flexibility unprecedented in culinary history.

Regional/national cuisine
America was and still is a nation of regional cuisines. It’s a key component of what makes American food “American.” It’s unusually diverse. The South, Chesapeake, Mid-Atlantic and New England demonstrated different eating habits, and still do today.

These habits are not random or coincidental. They have everything to do with concrete factors, such as the extent and nature of slavery, the extent and nature of Native American trade, the cultural ties that an immigrating population maintained with England, ethnic diversity, and the availability of land.

In 1700 a traveler who went from Georgia to Massachusetts would have been hard
pressed to identify an American cuisine. He would have seen pease porridge stew in New England, scrapple in Pennsylvania, smoked ham in the Chesapeake, and okra fried in palm oil in Carolina. By 1800, however, regional differences – while remaining quite powerful – had blended through the emergence of an active coastal trade. Regional foods intermingled and were incorporated into areas that previously did not know them.

This, in addition to the fact that colonists had, by 1750, made the kitchen a more prominent place in the house and stocked it with more advanced cooking equipment, helped universalize regional habits into a national one. But, in the end, like American politics, food habits did both: They stayed local while having a powerful national character.

Frontier influence
The American frontier eating experience was rough, very rough. Even wealthy elites, as much as they tried to outgrow the wild and wooly associations of the frontier, found themselves eating food that had been hunted and foraged and stewed in a single pot.

Most settlers wanted to replicate the established culinary habits of England. In spite of the many cookbooks they imported, however, they failed to do so, having to settle for compromise after compromise, and these compromises soon became standardized. Tree stumps took the place of chairs, an array of serving dishes were replaced by a single “mess” of a stew, hands were used in place of forks, napkins were replaced by shirtsleeves. These conditions improved with time, of course, but the willingness to make changes due to the conditions in the Colonies became a habit.

Food probably tasted quite good; it was almost always produced locally and almost always fresh. But the manner in which Americans ate took the ceremony out of eating to such an extent that Americans came to take pride in their simple, frugal ways, especially after the American Revolution, when America wanted to define itself as distinct from England, not just politically but culturally as well.

American food today
So much food writing today is overly celebratory. Too often we focus on the end result – the delicious product – without fully appreciating the toil that went into its production. If we’re going to understand food as something that’s more than part of a comfortable lifestyle – if we’re going to see how it shapes our lives in fundamental ways – we need to think about where it came from.

It’s amazing how intimately early Americans knew their food. With retail outlets few and far between before 1815, most Americans played a direct role in the production of their own food. They slaughtered meat, harvested grain, preserved fruit, maintained vegetable gardens, and did whatever it took to keep food available. While this intimacy diminished over time, it was constantly revived as Americans moved west throughout the 19th century. Calls for “slow food” are not nostalgic calls for a bygone era, but rather a reasonable, historically justified response to a modern way of production that has spun beyond our control.

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