A FOOD GEOGRAPHY OF THE GREAT PLAINS

BARBARA G. SHORTRIDGE

ABSTRACT. This article explores the regional identity of the Great Plains through its foodways using 744 responses from a mailed survey that asked participants to plan a representative menu for their locale. The strongest association is with beef—not surprising in an area known for cattle ranching. Other commonalities include potatoes, beans, and corn. Differentiation within the region is marked by preparation methods for beef as well as emphases on cornbread and peach cobbler in the south, rhubarb pie in the north, tortillas and sopapillas in the southwest, and pickles in two separate clusterings. Keywords: food preferences, foodways, Great Plains, regional identity.

Despite the fundamental importance of food to human existence, geographical knowledge of contemporary dietary patterns in the United States is far less developed than that of other cultural markers. We know that food choices are related to place and heritage and that they can be linked to the resurgent need for and interest in community-based identity in our postmodern society. Studies show that rapid cultural change and personal stress have led many citizens to embrace, reaffirm, and even reinvent aspects of the local as a way to increase their sense of attachment to place. Along with supporting local sports teams, attending folk festivals, and participating in historic enactments, people use and identify with regional foods. Food is an especially powerful connection to maintain. It is relatively inexpensive and accessible, and its taste and smell elicit an unmatched response of pleasure. Foods strongly associated with an area can easily take on symbolic qualities, and their consumption can evoke both personal nostalgia and community pride. By studying such culinary traditions, we can improve understanding of how modern Americans strive to create touchstones for group identity.

This article is based on a large survey of food preferences in the Great Plains, a section of the nation known for vast distances and sparse populations. It is also a region stereotyped as “American” in cultural heritage even though numerous ethnic enclaves dot its landscape, including those of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European and Hispanic origin and recent additions from Asia, Mexico, and elsewhere. Assumptions of physical and cultural homogeneity make the Plains an intriguing place in which to initiate a study of food geography. If variety exists there, it most assuredly does elsewhere in the country.

I explored the food preferences of selected Great Plains residents by asking them what they would serve to out-of-state guests who were interested in eating a meal representative of the region, a subject to which they had probably given thought in the past. With this exercise, executed through a mailed questionnaire, I gathered self-identified foods that had strong associations with various parts of the Plains. My analysis of these data focuses on four research questions: What is the overall
character of Plains cuisine? Does it reveal within-region variation? Do culinary traditions from the adjoining South, Southwest, West, or Midwest affect regional food habits? Have specific foods become cultural icons that symbolize group identity and thereby mark vernacular regions?

Regional Identity through Food

Although Wilbur Zelinsky urged geographers to address the intertwined topics of food and culture more than three decades ago (1973, 103–105), studies remain few. Some work exists on the location and development of restaurants (Pillsbury 1987, 1990; Zelinsky 1987; Manzo 1990, 1996; Jakle and Sculle 1999) and some on the consumption of specific foods (Kelly 1983; J. R. Shortridge and B. G. Shortridge 1983; B. G. Shortridge and J. R. Shortridge 1989; de Wit 1992; Frenkel 1995), but we still lack basic knowledge and analyses of regional cuisines.¹ This gap exists despite renewed public interest in all things related to food, as demonstrated by increased cookbook sales, new television shows, and expanded food sections of newspapers. The main problem is scarcity of appropriate place-related data. In the absence of census materials or independent field surveys, scholars are reduced to anecdotal materials that have a narrow spatial focus. Proprietary data collected by the marketing divisions of large food-processing companies are inaccessible to the public for competitive reasons and are limited to specific products. Community cookbooks, especially those compiled for charitable purposes, tend to feature recipes for exotic dishes instead of everyday foods (Ireland 1981; Bower 1997; Haber 2002; Theophano 2002). Because geographically detailed consumption information is nearly nonexistent, one solution is to ask people about their preferences. Such is the basis for the research reported here.

Modern studies of regional culture stress the concept of group identity and base many of their arguments on the need for people to differentiate themselves from others through the invention of traditions (Bowden 1992; Ayers and others 1996; Wood 1997; Conforti 2001). In recent times the pressures of postmodern society have heightened this quest for local individualism, a process that is interpreted as a countercurrent to a commercialism that seeks to homogenize experience. Much of this work fits under the label “sense of place” and either demonstrates or espouses ways to achieve harmonious and ecological relationships with our surroundings (Tuan 1974; Relph 1976; Hough 1990; Entikin 1991; Hummon 1992; Ryden 1993; Sanders 1993; Jackson 1994; Feld and Basso 1996; Tauxe 1998; Putnam 2000). The literature suggests that having pride in the local enhances personal satisfaction and that attachment to a particular place can be supplemented by participatory activities such as service on local governing boards or purchases at farmers’ markets. The ideas, though valuable, tend toward the impressionistic. They need grounding with data such as those that are included here.

Issues of regional identity are comparable in many ways with those for ethnicity, a subject that has been studied in considerable depth (Gans 1979; Lieberson and Waters 1988; Sollors 1988; Alba 1990; Waters 1990; Stern and Cicala 1991; Nagel 1994;
Abrahamson 1996; Hoelscher 1998), including the role therein played by food (Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore 1986; Magliocco 1993; Tuchman and Levine 1993; Laudan 1996; Montañó 1997; Gabaccia 1998; Saltzman 1998; Pilcher 2001; Arreola 2002; B. G. Shortridge 2003a, 2003b). Ethnic dishes, even those eaten infrequently or on special occasions, have been shown to be a more popular means for maintaining (and sometimes reestalshing) identity than have activities involving language and other traditions. Regional food habits can have the same associative power. The two ideas overlap in the Hispanic Southwest, Hawaii, many urban areas, and elsewhere. The regional aspect remains only vaguely known, however, despite the growing belief among folklorists and others that regionalism now exceeds ethnicity as a means of group distinctiveness in the United States (Jones 1976; Budra 2000).

**Survey Task and Respondents**

Establishing baseline data for a region as extensive as the Great Plains involves the difficult choice of how to begin gathering such information. My approach is arbitrary in some ways, but it provides a useful first step toward understanding a complex and important topic. I decided to focus on a group of people who have good knowledge about their local area and to ask them a single, direct question that involved a familiar decision. I further elected to do this through a mailed survey, reasoning that this procedure would allow respondents to think about their task and follow a procedure they would use in real life. My intention was to provide an expansive view of Great Plains cuisine by collecting a wide range of place-specific data and then generalizing the results into larger regional patterns.

To gather data about Great Plains food preferences I asked a carefully selected group of people to create a hypothetical meal. My instructions were: “Plan a meal for out-of-state guests that is representative of your part of the state. Do not be concerned about seasonal availability of foods, and assume that this will be the major meal of the day. You may have as many items as you wish, but please include dessert and beverage. If something complex is selected, indicate major ingredients.” The wording of the request was chosen to present an easily completed exercise from which I could generate a database containing ingredients, preparation methods, and combinations of dishes. “Your part of the state” gave participants license to reference locally produced foods, brand names, and ethnic dishes common to their community. Because a special-occasion event was specified, participants were encouraged to switch from a personal perspective that might involve a family’s favorite dishes to selections that would be other directed and representative of their locale. The task therefore was likely to yield a complete menu rather than an everyday macaroni-and-cheese answer. Although the request was simple, respondents’ comments suggest that considerable thought went into their menus. The resultant data set is remarkably rich and nuanced.

Target groups for the survey were people who were knowledgeable about their local area and who were accustomed to answering queries: agricultural extension personnel, newspaper food editors, self-declared good home cooks who were se-
TABLE I—RESPONDENTS IN THE GREAT PLAINS FOOD SURVEY
(percentage of respondents in each category, by state)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY OF RESPONDENT</th>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>Extension Personnel</th>
<th>Librarians</th>
<th>Historical Society or Museum Directors</th>
<th>Geographers</th>
<th>Others*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kansas</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Great Plains</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes Taste of Home contributors, newspaper editors, county clerks, and unsolicited responses.

lected as editors of Taste of Home magazine based on their country-cooking stories and recipes, directors of public libraries and county historical societies, county clerks, and cultural geographers at the states’ institutions of higher learning (Table I). These people are not representative of the general population, but they do have high levels of community awareness. Their participation helped me to obtain the broad geographical coverage I needed for creating baseline culinary maps of the Great Plains. In most cases, three questionnaires were sent to each county in the hope that at least one would be returned. This emphasis on reasonably complete county coverage resulted in underrepresentation of the region's urban population, a shortcoming that needs to be addressed in subsequent research. I collected the data reported on here between 1996 and 2001 and used online and print directories so that I could address the request to a specific person as often as possible, in order to enhance the probability of a reply. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included in the mailing packet. The overall response rate was 41 percent, including at least one response from all but 61 of the region's 593 counties.

THE MEAL

A food portrait for the region as a whole can be summarized as a six-part meal (Table II). Beef, potatoes and bread (both would be served), beans, and a lettuce salad dominate this menu, along with pie for dessert and tea or coffee as a beverage. Of these items, beef, potatoes, bread, and tea were listed by a majority of respondents, with considerable regional diversity existing elsewhere. With the possible exception of iced tea, this composite portrait reflects a simple, even stereotypical meal traditionally associated with the country's rural society. My respondents agreed,
saying for example, "This is also a simple, down-to-earth, meat and potatoes type of community so meals are pretty basic, even for company. We don't do fancy!" (Jackson County, South Dakota). People from the region's urban areas, for the most part, submitted more cosmopolitan menus. Geographical variation is evident from the presentation of the Plains counties within each state (Table III).

**MAIN DISHES**

Admonitions to "Eat Beef" posted on pickup trucks and along roadsides across the Great Plains suggest that local people support their nearly ubiquitous cattle industry by consuming what they produce. This proposition was definitely borne out by survey respondents: 71 percent of them selected beef, with numbers as high as 80 percent in Kansas and 75 percent in Texas. Wyoming Plains people represented the low end of the continuum at 54 percent, mostly because they substituted wild game (antelope or elk) as a red meat. Even in Wyoming, however, beef was acknowledged as important. "This [steak cooked on a grill] is a meal we serve to our guests a lot as most people in our area are beef eaters" (Laramie County). These results mirror those in a survey of Nebraska residents, who also chose beef most often (Lewis and others 1995).

Beef is much more than just a food preference in the Plains. Unsolicited but numerous comments on the survey forms show that beef provides group identity as well. Often the state of origin was specified, as in "Nebraska beef" or "North Dakota beef." Some respondents referred to their role in the production process: "I like to serve good home-grown beef! Best meat in the world! We butcher our own cattle and have prime rib roasts cut" (Spink County, South Dakota). "This is ranching country and most dishes have beef" (Quay County, New Mexico). Another respondent, from Richland County, Montana, expressed the agricultural attachment more succinctly: "Beef—what else can you serve in eastern Montana?"

Maps that highlight preferences for four particular beef dishes display distinct spatial patterns (Figure 1). The preferred format overall is a steak, chosen by 25 per-
Table III—Composite State Menus in the Great Plains
(percentages of respondents who selected these menu item)

Key: SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS = 250%; capital and lowercase letters, roman = 35–49%;
capital and lowercase letters, italics = 25–34%; (lowercase letters, in parentheses) = 14–24%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Montana (Great Plains counties)</th>
<th>North Dakota</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEEF: Steak or (roast)</td>
<td>BEEF: Roast or (steak)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POTATOES</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREAD</td>
<td>BREAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn or (green beans)</td>
<td>CORN or (carrots)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE SALAD</td>
<td>Raw vegetables or Pickles or Lettuce salad or (fruit salad) or (jello)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple pie</td>
<td>Apple pie or (raspberry pie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COFFEE or Milk or Water or (iced tea)</td>
<td>COFFEE or MILK or Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wyoming (Great Plains counties)</th>
<th>South Dakota</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEEF: Roast</td>
<td>BEEF: Roast or Steak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POTATOES</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREAD</td>
<td>BREAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn or (green beans)</td>
<td>CORN or (green beans) or (carrots)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE SALAD or (fruit salad)</td>
<td>(lettuce salad) or (pickles) or (fruit salad) or (raw vegetables)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple dessert or Brownie or (ice cream)</td>
<td>Apple pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICED TEA or COFFEE or (milk) or (lemonade) or (wine)</td>
<td>MILK or COFFEE or Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colorado (Great Plains counties)</th>
<th>Nebraska</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEEF: Steak or Mexican</td>
<td>BEEF: Steak or Roast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POTATOES or (rice)</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread or (tortillas)</td>
<td>BREAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn</td>
<td>CORN or Green beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE SALAD or (fruit salad)</td>
<td>LETTUCE SALAD or (raw vegetables)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(apple dessert) or (ice cream)</td>
<td>Apple pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICED TEA or Coffee or Beer or (wine)</td>
<td>COFFEE or ICED TEA or (water) or (milk)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Mexico (Great Plains counties)</th>
<th>Kansas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEEF: MEXICAN or (steak) or (chicken)</td>
<td>BEEF: Steak or (roast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice or (potatoes)</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TORTILLAS or (bread)</td>
<td>BREAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinto beans or Refried beans or Corn or (green beans)</td>
<td>Corn or Green beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettuce salad or Raw vegetables</td>
<td>LETTUCE SALAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sopapillas or (chocolate cake)</td>
<td>Apple pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICED TEA or (beer) or (coffee)</td>
<td>ICED TEA or COFFEE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Texas (Great Plains counties)</th>
<th>Oklahoma (Great Plains counties)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEEF: Brisket or (Mexican) or (chicken fried steak) or (chicken)</td>
<td>BEEF: (brisket) or (chicken fried steak) or (pork) or (steak)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potatoes</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread or (tortillas)</td>
<td>Bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinto beans or (green beans)</td>
<td>Green beans or Corn or (okra)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettuce salad or Potato salad or (coleslaw) or (pickles) or (onions)</td>
<td>Lettuce salad or (raw vegetables) or (coleslaw) or (fruit salad) or (potato salad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach cobbler</td>
<td>(peach cobbler) or (apple dessert) or (chocolate cake)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICED TEA or (beer)</td>
<td>ICED TEA or Coffee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIG. 1—In the Great Plains, striking regional differences exist in preferences for major beef dishes. At least one respondent in every highlighted county indicated that he or she would serve this dish. Dots indicate counties with no data. (Cartography by the University of Kansas Cartographic and GIS Services)
cent of respondents. A woman from Wibaux County, Montana, said, “Being in the heart of Beef Country I would be inclined to serve a steak dinner,” a comment echoed by others in the sample. Although not a continuous distribution, steak eating is spread throughout the Plains, with more intense areas in the northwestern quadrant. Respondents from Nebraska, the state with the highest rate for steak at 40 percent, had a slight preference for a T-bone over a ribeye. Of those who volunteered a cooking preference, most said they would serve the meat well done.

A roast, the next most popular format for beef, was mentioned by 18 percent of respondents. This choice is concentrated north of the Kansas-Oklahoma border. North Dakota has the highest rate at 38 percent; South Dakota follows at 32 percent. One woman from Slope County, North Dakota, informed me, “We just did a meal with this menu [roast beef] for a cattlemen’s forum. We will be doing a meal for our 4–H [a rural youth service organization] leaders banquet in December that will be similar.” Pot roasts (which combine potatoes, carrots, and onions with the meat in a covered baking pan) are common in the region and provide a good example of a food and culinary method that has persisted: “It’s a quintessential form of home cooking that never fell from favor in the Heartland” (Fertig 1999, 185). In the southern Plains the scarcity of roasts may be partially explained by a tradition of avoiding extended oven use during the warm season, but competing preparations for beef are a factor as well. Two of these alternate beef dishes have cultlike followings.

Brisket, overall chosen by 10 percent of Plains respondents, was selected by 30 percent of Texans and 22 percent of Oklahomans. Almost always served “barbecued,” this dish’s regional affiliation is indicated by the comment that “my out-of-state guests ask for the typical West Texas menu” of beef brisket (Ward County). An outlier occurs in Kansas counties near Kansas City, a metropolitan area that proclaims itself a barbecue capital, with an emphasis on brisket (Trillin 1974, 17). Barbecue there is promoted through two nationally famous restaurants—Gates Bar-B-Q and Arthur Bryant’s—and many imitators. The preparation of brisket has variations, some of which have regional origins. I received instructions as detailed as this from Blanco County, Texas: “Texas BBQ is smoked, not grilled, for six plus hours and very flavorful. BBQ sauce is optional and served on the side—not on the meat. The meat is usually flavored prior to smoking with either a dry rub or a marinade.” Several people mentioned the appeal of a main dish that serves many and is relatively inexpensive. A woman from Tillman County, Oklahoma, reported that if she were “planning a large group, I’d have smoked BBQ brisket, it’s cheaper.”

Barbecue is more than just brisket, of course. It also refers to the preparation of pork ribs, chicken, sausage, and other meats using some of the same techniques described above. Respondents in this survey noted regional cooking competitions involving barbecue and also explained how its outdoor preparation and setting typically merge to provide a culinary experience. “A backyard barbecue would be very common,” reported a man from Comal County, Texas. Another Texan, from Callahan County, said, “In West Texas . . . we have outdoor barbecues out under mesquite trees. Wonderful eating.”
Chicken-fried steak was also a subregional favorite. Although only 8 percent of respondents throughout the Plains selected it, these numbers reached 21 percent in the Oklahoma sample (concentrated in eastern counties) and 17 percent in Texas (northern and Panhandle locations). The staff of the Austin, Texas, History Center discussed my request and decided that this main dish should be one of their choices (along with Tex-Mex and BBQ). “There are as many ways of cooking it as there are cooks,” claimed a curator at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum in Canyon, Texas, “but it basically is a tenderized steak ‘fried like chicken’.” Among the secrets of preparation, according to my perusal of cookbooks, are a soaking in buttermilk after tenderizing; a dredging in seasoned flour, buttermilk, and then flour again; frying in a large cast-iron skillet with hot oil; and turning the meat only once. Chicken-fried steak was almost always served with mashed potatoes and white, pepper-flecked, cream gravy. “Some people eat CFS at least two times a day,” wrote a woman in Wilbarger County, Texas, who went on to express concern about diabetes, heart disease, and obesity in her county.

Main dishes based on meats other than beef showed up only in small quantities throughout the Plains sample. Pork, for example, accounted for no more than 9 percent of the responses overall, although it did reach 16 percent in Oklahoma. Similarly, chicken was chosen by only 10 percent, with Texas being the highest at 16 percent. Most of the chicken was fried. Pork and chicken are common southern meats, of course, so their higher values in Oklahoma and Texas are not surprising. On a more local scale, preferences for lamb in Irion, Tom Green, and Upton Counties in Texas reflected a sheep-ranching district there. Lamb, however, represented less than 1 percent of respondents’ choices overall.

Several other main dishes deserve mention, because they obviously resonated strongly with some people. One of these is bison (buffalo). Herds are now being reestablished in selected areas of the Plains, and the meat, proclaimed to be healthy because of its low fat and cholesterol counts, appears to be increasing in popularity. A cooperative bison-processing plant in New Rockford, North Dakota, is active in marketing. Among the twelve respondents who mentioned bison (in Colorado, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming), two North Dakota residents said that they would put bison on a menu representative of their state because it is unique. Another, from Barnes County, claimed, “North Dakota is becoming famous for Buffalo burgers.” After eating my way across North Dakota during one week in the summer of 2001, I can attest that buffalo burgers are prominent on restaurant menus, often positioned as a signature dish. A South Dakotan made the local connection even more explicit: “We are adjacent to Custer State Park, famous for its buffalo herd, so we planned a barbeque with buffalo steaks.”

Wild game, fowl, and fish were symbolically important main-dish options for people in the northwesternmost section of the Great Plains. One person wrote that even though, “in Wyoming, red meat is essential, it does not need to be beef” (Natrona County). This respondent went on to list grilled elk or moose. Another cook indicated that she “may substitute elk if guests eat game,” although her conservative
First choice was roast beef (Sheridan County, Wyoming). Antelope and venison are other sources of red meat, "but not [antelope] from the sagebrush area—gives the meat an off-taste" (Campbell County, Wyoming). Dried deer meat (venison) as an ingredient in soups or stews also appeared on menus sent from the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations. Fish choices from the northwestern counties were split between walleye and trout. In other parts of the Plains, pheasant was popular in eastern South Dakota, and sage chicken received minor mentions in Wyoming.

The other small-count but regionally significant meal was one that respondents generically called "Mexican" or "Tex-Mex" (Figure 2). This version of southwestern cuisine was modified to please Anglo palates by, as several people reported, "subtracting heat and adding more meat." It also has more cheese and tomato-based sauces than the original. Most often, Mexican American cuisine is served as a combination plate in a restaurant with a beef taco in a crisp corn tortilla, a chicken enchilada with sauce, a bean burrito wrapped in a flour tortilla, a side of refried beans or Spanish rice, and liberal sprinklings of grated processed cheese and shredded iceberg lettuce. The main dish is preceded by salsa and tortilla chips in this
setting. In the survey enchiladas were mentioned most often, but fajitas, tacos, and tamales were also popular. This truly hybrid ethnic cuisine was selected by only 8 percent of respondents overall but by 54 percent in the New Mexico Plains counties, followed by 29 percent in Colorado and 20 percent in Texas. The popularity of Mexican American cuisine as everyday fare in the Great Plains would be understated in a survey such as this one that asks for a special-occasion menu. Acceptance, however, was indicated by remarks such as, “In this area [Coleman County, Texas] everyone loves Mexican food,” or from Weld County, Colorado, the meal “would be something Southwestern,” or “Our area has a large Mexican influence” (Morton County, Kansas).

Finally, it is not surprising that vegetarians are few in the Great Plains. One person from western Kansas, who actually offered a menu based on steak, said, “I am a vegetarian and do not fit into this part of the country.” Only seven respondents indicated a meatless meal; of those, three would serve pinto beans as their main course. Because this dish sometimes includes salt pork, lard, or bacon, these meals may not be strictly vegetarian, based on the limited information available. Mentions of organic meats were even rarer than vegetarian responses.

STARCHES

The meals reported by Great Plains residents could generally be described as hearty in nature and as having many separate dishes on the table. The consumption of two complex-carbohydrate foods per meal was common, especially in northern states. Potatoes were the preferred starch source overall (68 percent of responses), but a baked-bread product was almost as popular (64 percent). Such high percentages indicate overlapping functions as menu items. Other carbohydrate dishes that perform similar functions in a meal were present only in very low counts. Rice was selected by 7 percent of respondents; pasta, by only 2 percent.

Baked (26 percent) and mashed (25 percent) potato consumption varied in their spatial distribution. Baked potatoes were most common in Montana (44 percent) and Nebraska (36 percent), but none existed on New Mexico menus. Mashed potatoes were mentioned most often in South Dakota (38 percent) and North Dakota (31 percent) but were low-count items in Colorado (15 percent) and New Mexico (17 percent). In both of these latter states, rice replaced potatoes on the menu and functioned as a side dish in a Mexican meal. “Spanish” or “Mexican” rice was used as the name for a stove-top rice dish prepared with tomatoes and chiles.

Rolls (35 percent), bread (20 percent), cornbread (5 percent), and biscuits (4 percent) shared the baked-bread product category. Rolls (northerners call them “buns”) were preferred at the highest rate in Kansas (53 percent); bread, often home baked, achieved frequencies as high as 30 percent in South Dakota and Montana. Cornbread and biscuits were more regional, with cornbread common in a tightly bounded section of Texas and Oklahoma (Figure 2) and biscuits mentioned most frequently in Oklahoma (12 percent). Cornbread was often paired with pinto beans or brisket in the responses from Oklahoma and Texas, and sometimes all three items were
present on the same menu. In this part of the country, cornbread is occasionally crumbled into cooked beans by the diner to absorb the cooking liquid and act as a thickener.

Tortillas in Mexican-American cooking have a slightly different function in a meal than do other bread products. They are used as a convenient wrapper to contain meat and vegetables or as a handheld scoop to collect food from a plate. In general, homemade wheat (or "flour") tortillas have replaced corn tortillas because they require fewer cooking steps, but both products are commercially available, and respondents sometimes listed both on their menus. Preference for tortillas was minor overall (7 percent) but concentrated in the southwestern fringes of the region (Figure 2). Note that the preference areas for tortillas and cornbread, each representing a distinct culinary culture from beyond the Plains border, are not contiguous except in one small part of east-central Texas. This separation does not represent a transition zone; neither is found in the interstitial area.

Jams and jellies, traditional accompaniments to bread, give cooks an opportunity to utilize regionally grown products and make the meal more distinctive. In this survey such items occurred with regularity in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, where respondents featured specific wild fruits much more often than the standard strawberry or raspberry. Kansans preferred sand-hill plum (Prunus angustifolia) preserves. Respondents from Nebraska, the Dakotas, and eastern Wyoming chose the chokecherry (Prunus virginiana L.). These tiny fruits, harvested in midsummer, have a sweet-tart-bitter flavor even when cooked for jelly. North Dakotans say that chokecherries can best be found in isolated coulees and that everyone has his or her secret spot (for more information on these two fruits, see Young 1993).

COOKED VEGETABLES

Corn and beans are the dominant vegetables in the Great Plains, with a persistent theme of "garden fresh" running through the responses. Respondents selected sweet corn as their favorite vegetable (40 percent of all respondents), with corn on the cob being the primary serving style. Corn is most popular in Nebraska (61 percent), North Dakota (56 percent), and South Dakota (55 percent), with Nebraskans, especially, commenting enthusiastically on the choice. "Fresh sweet corn on the cob [is] also raised here" (Chase County) or "We put up our own corn" (Gosper County). Texans, in contrast, mentioned corn on only 5 percent of their questionnaires. Respondents from the drier southwestern quadrant, in general, had fewer fresh corn dishes on menus.

As a general category, beans were chosen by 47 percent of those submitting a menu, but references to specific varieties and cooking methods differed (Figure 3). A distinct boundary between preferences for green beans and pinto beans exists in Colorado, but the rest of the north–south division is more gradual. Green beans (23 percent overall) were most popular in Kansas (42 percent) and Oklahoma (36 percent), where they were often cooked slowly with onions and bacon fat. Preferences for pinto beans or red beans (11 percent overall) peaked in Texas (38 percent) and
New Mexico (33 percent). Refried beans (a variant of pinto beans and a staple of Mexican-style cuisine) were mentioned in New Mexico (25 percent) and in specific parts of adjoining states. To make this dish, dry pinto beans are cooked for two to four hours and seasoned with onion, garlic, and/or chili powder. The beans then are mashed, fried in lard, and garnished with grated cheese.

Not all people in the Plains eat cooked vegetables—13 percent of respondents did not list any on their menu. In an area that is agriculturally based and has abundant farmers' markets, farm stands, and gardens, this lack is notable. A partial reason was given by a respondent from sparsely populated Yuma County, Colorado, who said, "The fresh produce in our grocery stores is pretty limited so there isn't a big variety of items to choose from." Another explanation involves the ongoing transition of a lettuce salad into a legitimate vegetable dish, at least for purposes of establishing a personal daily nutritional count. The survey data were not detailed enough for a definitive conclusion about this trend, but they did suggest that, in some situations, raw vegetables were replacing cooked vegetables. The findings reported here are reinforced by a telephone survey of Nebraska residents, where let-
tuce was the second-ranking vegetable and where one-third of all vegetables were eaten raw (Lewis and others 1994).

Another indicator of the abundance of food available on Great Plains tables is that some respondents would serve more than one vegetable. “In many farm homes . . . two to four vegetable dishes are served” (Leavenworth County, Kansas). The seasonal surplus of produce from home gardening is another source of bounty. According to a comment from Richland County, Montana, “this is an agricultural area with gardens and orchards. There is still a tradition of fresh food, from scratch baking, and lots of food. With a Scandinavian background most housewives still can and garden.”

**SALADS**

A lettuce salad was the preferred form chosen by 45 percent of the respondents. More than half of the menus from Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, and Wyoming used some combination of lettuce and other raw vegetables, sometimes with detailed lists of ingredients and specific salad dressings. A chopped, fresh garden tomato, for example, was a requirement for some. Dorothy Lynch Home Style salad dressing, which is bottled in Duncan, Nebraska, received numerous mentions in southeastern Nebraska and adjacent parts of Kansas. “You notice Dorothy Lynch is very popular! I know of former residents who take cases of it back to faraway places when they come to visit” (Red Willow County, Nebraska).

Other popular salad formats included raw vegetables (14 percent) either singly, as in sliced tomatoes or marinated cucumbers, or grouped on a tray. The latter are sometimes accompanied by a dip. North Dakota residents used raw vegetables the most (33 percent) with carrots, celery, and radishes forming a popular combination. Fruit (12 percent), coleslaw (11 percent), and potato salad (11 percent) were also chosen regularly throughout the region, with the potato dish especially prominent in Texas (32 percent). Cantaloupe from Rocky Ford on the Arkansas River, “Melon Capital of the World,” was singled out by respondents from Colorado, and Pecos cantaloupe by those from western Texas. Some Oklahomans mentioned Rush Springs watermelon.

A typical southern Plains meal included a meat-based main course and then a standard set of chilled side dishes, including coleslaw, potato salad, and sometimes pickles. The distribution of pickles in Texas closely matches that for brisket. Pickles represent a culinary and geographical puzzle because they appeared in two widely separated zones, first in North Dakota (31 percent) and South Dakota (22 percent), where they were often said to be homemade, and then again in Texas (19 percent), usually along with raw onions and jalapeño peppers (Figure 3). The role of pickles in a meal is unclear. Perhaps they are a way to promote the concept of bounty or to provide a taste counterpoint to other parts of the meal. Dill, sweet, and beet pickles are popular in the Dakotas, where they often are served together in relish trays. Such a display, according to one Plains cookbook author, is “a salute to the days when housewives took pride in the homemade pickles and preserves they made” (Fertig 1999, xiii).
Although some people might expect northern Plains respondents to have ex-
tolled the virtues of jello salad, this dish represented only 7 percent of salad choices
overall. North Dakota was the highest at 15 percent. Dave Grettler, a professor from
Brown County, South Dakota, explained the historic prestige of a gelatin-based
dish in this way: “Jello is a potent cultural and geographic artifact. Until recently,
jello meant ‘city folk’; people with electricity and refrigeration. A number of stu-
dents have told me how proud their parents/grandparents were to bring their first
jello dish to a summertime church supper. Jello meant they had finally ‘arrived.’
Rural folks without electricity or refrigeration had to bring vegetable salads or pies.
This interesting scenario occurred in western and central South Dakota where mainly
remote farms were not fully electrified until the 1950s.” As modernization of house-
holds is now nearly universal across the Plains, this dish has lost its initial symbolic
value. Personal favorites still are evident, however: “Salad here starts with a jello or
whipped cream base to which fruit or marshmallows are added” (Trail County,
North Dakota) or “jello salad—must have marshmallows in it” (Grand Forks County,
North Dakota).

DESSERTS

Desserts of the Great Plains, according to my respondents, are traditional and highly
regional. Often they incorporate the produce of home or local orchards and gar-
dens, with “apples from our own trees” (Cass County, North Dakota) being a typi-
cal comment. Apple desserts (cobbler, crisp, pie, and strudel) are popular almost
universally throughout the northern Plains (Figure 4). At a few specific locations,
however, preference pockets for brownies or chocolate cake alter this pattern. Sev-
eral of these pockets are in western, semiarid locations where availability of locally
grown seasonal fruits is restricted. The southern Plains, in contrast, have a more
complicated dessert-preference pattern. Peach cobbler was chosen most often in
Texas and selected parts of Oklahoma. The presence of local peach trees, especially
those in the Hill Country, was mentioned in Texas. A recipe sent by a respondent
from Randall County, Texas, emphasized the simple preparation of this dessert—all
six of the ingredients would be mixed and baked in the same pan. Flan and sopapillas
were paired with Mexican American meals in survey responses. Flan is a form of
custard usually served with a caramel sauce—and sometimes even with pralines. Its
distribution is restricted to the southernmost Plains counties in Texas. Sopapillas
are made of flour and baking powder, fried in oil like doughnuts, and then sprinkled
with sugar and cinnamon or drizzled with honey. They are regionally popular in
the westernmost Great Plains counties of southern Colorado, New Mexico, and an
adjacent small part of Texas.

An undifferentiated area, not dominated by a specific dessert, exists throughout
western Oklahoma and the adjoining High Plains counties. Respondents there
named cheesecake, chocolate cake, and spumoni among others, but no clear favor-
ite emerged from the data and definitely not one that formed a preference region.

Pie was by far the most common form of dessert on the menus, representing
49 percent of all responses. South Dakota (71 percent) and Nebraska (69 percent)
Dessert Preferences in the Great Plains

Primary Dessert Regions

Secondary Pie Preferences

Fig. 4—Apple-based desserts dominate throughout most of the northern Great Plains. The south has a more complicated pattern, with preferences divided among peach cobbler and two traditional Mexican American desserts. Pies made from locally grown fruits and nuts form secondary preference regions in the eastern counties. (Cartography by the University of Kansas Cartographic and GIS Services)

led the states in this preference, but the other northern Plains states had levels nearly as high. Apple pie, often served with vanilla ice cream, was the favorite of respondents north of a line that runs through the middle of Oklahoma (Figure 4). In all of the relevant states, apple pie was cited more often than any other kind of pie. When this clear preference is eliminated, however, three secondary pie zones are revealed. Pecan pie was preferred in the eastern Great Plains counties of Texas and Oklahoma, where "pecan trees are numerous and many local recipes take advantage of this" (Tulsa County, Oklahoma). Cherry pie was the choice in the eastern and central sections of the middle states, where cherry trees can grow. Rhubarb pie was chosen in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. "Rhubarb is plentiful here so I've used it to make this plan" (Mountrail County, North Dakota).

Residents in the eastern counties of the Great Plains, where locally harvested fruits and nuts are available, regularly incorporated these ingredients into their desserts, such as strawberry shortcake. People in drier, western counties had preferences for desserts constructed from generic pantry ingredients. Chocolate cake, for
example, was chosen in western Kansas and Nebraska, whereas apple and cherry pie represented the eastern half of these states.

Great Plains desserts are remarkably diverse. Many of the choices appear to reflect an individual cook's favorite rather than being based strictly on local ingredients or traditions. Some even were invented and named as a form of satire. An Oklahoman planned to serve cow-chip cookies (oatmeal cookies with peanut butter and three kinds of chocolate candy), for example. A Kansas dirt-pie dessert selection was made from crushed chocolate sandwich cookies, pudding, and a whipped topping. Several North Dakotans touted buffalo-chips candy (chocolate-covered potato chips) as mementos of what the bison left behind.

**BEVERAGES**

Most respondents in the survey would offer more than one beverage to their guests. This fact, as well as a preference for iced tea and coffee among Plains respondents, may not be surprising, but the striking distribution pattern for each beverage is (Figure 5). Iced tea was listed consistently on menus south of a line that runs through Montana and the Dakotas. Coffee, in contrast, was mentioned in areas to the north of a line that winds through Colorado and northern Oklahoma, leaving a broad transition area in the middle section of the Plains. Iced tea accounted for 54 percent of overall responses, with comments from the core area in Texas such as, “and of course the drink would be iced tea” (Carson County) or “iced tea, the national drink of Texas” (Lubbock County, Texas). If ambiguous “tea” answers were added to those for “iced tea,” then the percentage would have been 67 percent. For a beverage with southern ties, its adoption as far north as central Montana is interesting. Because most of the surveys were mailed in October or November, the choice was not connected to hot weather. The drink's low cost and convenience are possible explanations. The Tea Council reports that iced tea constitutes 80 percent of all tea consumed in the United States and that its distribution is nationwide (Fabricant 1992). The results of this study partially confirm that claim.

If one looks beyond the primary beverage choices and examines secondary patterns, additional clusters of preference are revealed. Modest-count beverages in the survey included milk (19 percent), with a preference zone highly concentrated in the northern Plains (Figure 5). Some respondents specified “milk for the children,” although this is a part of the country where adults drink milk as well. In fact, it is the official state beverage in four of the Great Plains states: North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. For Oklahoma, however, only one respondent in my survey mentioned milk as a beverage, suggesting that the state's politicians were not realistic in their declaration.

Beer (11 percent) was listed with conspicuously low frequencies in the south-central Plains where Southern Baptists and “dry” counties abound. Its percentages increased along the Colorado Front Range, where Coors or a microbrewery product was singled out, but, in general, the Great Plains has lagged in the microbrewery fad (Flack 1997). In addition, imported Mexican beers appear in southern Texas,
Beverage Preferences in the Great Plains

Coffee and Iced Tea

Secondary Beverage Preferences

Coffee and iced tea in equal proportions

FIG. 5—In the Great Plains, coffee and iced tea dominate exclusive regions that are joined by a broad zone of intermixed preferences. Milk is a secondary beverage choice in the north; beer serves that function near the Rocky Mountain front in Colorado and on the Edwards Plateau of Texas. (Cartography by the University of Kansas Cartographic and GIS Services)

along with lower-count margaritas, as accompaniments to a Tex-Mex meal. Some Texans opted for local brands such as Shiner Bock or Lone Star; others just wanted a “cold beer,” referring to the state’s custom of icing longnecked bottles.

Delimiting a Regional Cuisine

By designating key ingredients and preparation methods, as well as detailing specific dishes, this study establishes important baseline information for the Great Plains. It is a food census of sorts that can function as a benchmark for future studies of Plains food and culture. Beef, potatoes, bread, and pie are important signature foods of this cuisine, with steak as the symbolic dish. With high counts and widespread distribution, steak was also the menu item most often accompanied by comments about preparation methods, associations with local ranching culture, and place identity.

The second research question involved the degree of regional variation within the Plains counties. Here the data revealed several remarkably sharp patterns, all dividing the region north to south. The coffee–iced tea divide follows this orienta-
Fig. 6—Culinary map of the Great Plains. Delimitation of composite food incursions from adjoining culture regions reveals the core of Great Plains cuisine. (Cartography by the University of Kansas Cartographic and GIS Services)
tion, for example, as do preferences for green beans versus pinto beans. Similarly, pies made from locally grown fruits and nuts order themselves latitudinally along the eastern border of the Plains. Selected desserts matched the east–west precipitation distribution in the region. For desserts, people generally utilized seasonal fruits and nuts in the east but store-bought ingredients for cakes and bars in the west.

The third research question concerned the influence of adjoining, primary regions on Great Plains food. Southern incursions (using cornbread, okra, and peach cobbler as examples) are evident in parts of Oklahoma and Texas, whereas Southwestern foods such as flan, sopapillas, and tortillas are present along the southern and western margins of the region. Use of wild game and fresh-caught fish plus wild berries distinguishes some northwestern borderlands, those that are adjacent to the mountain West. Bountiful foods associated with the farming culture of the Midwest were found in eastern parts of the Dakotas and Nebraska. Pickles, which would fill some of the extra serving dishes on a groaning table, functioned as a marker in this context in northern sections. Clearly, with respect to foodways the Great Plains is not an isolated area. If the zones of incursion noted above are demarcated on a single map, the remaining residual area could be considered the core of Great Plains cuisine (Figure 6). This zone—"Steak Country U.S.A."—extends southward from eastern Montana and western North Dakota to the southern border of Colorado and Kansas. It corresponds closely to regional culture delimitations made using other criteria (J. R. Shortridge 1988).

Finally, the fourth research question posed the possibility of using particular foods to set culture boundaries. Probably the most noticeable example are the separate regions of cornbread and tortilla selections. A similarly distinct line between preferences for apple pie and peach cobbler divides the northern and southern Plains along approximately the same boundary as that established by settlement geographies.

It is appropriate to speculate about the future of Plains food and culture. Just as there is concern about declining population in some parts of the Plains, so too are there questions about whether dishes now served by residents will survive the march to a global economy. Traditional foods and customs are much more likely to persist as at-home cooking rather than as restaurant food. Some of the dishes mentioned here require specialized knowledge and time to prepare, for example, and thus may be relegated more and more to special occasions. People will make their own decisions, of course, but regional writer Lynne Ireland (1991, 218) stated well a likely outcome: "Even where the tongue of the Old Country is silent, the old songs forgotten, the food remains. It would probably be easier to let these traditions fade and to eat only what television tells us to. But traditions die hard. On the plains, at powwows and family reunions, at birthdays and funerals, at the breakfast table and the picnic table, old food customs are faithfully carried on."

Notes

1. For general access to the geographical literature on American foodways, consult Pillsbury 1998, B. G. Shortridge and J. R. Shortridge 1998, and B. G. Shortridge 2000. These works, along with other
place-related writing on the subject by folklorists, anthropologists, and historians (Brown and Mussell 1984; Humphrey and Humphrey 1988; Bentley 1998; Wilson and Gillespie 1999; Inness 2001; Belasco and Scranton 2002; Counihan 2002), have contributed to the emerging interdisciplinary field of food studies.

2. Data from the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas were collected in 1996 and 1997; those from the remaining states, between 1999 and 2001.

3. The counties that define the Great Plains in this study are the ones used by the Encyclopedia of the Great Plains (Wishart 2004). The people who answered the question were predominantly female (84 percent). Of the respondents, 7 percent did not report their age, 9 percent said they were under thirty, 46 percent were between thirty and fifty, and 38 percent were more than fifty years old. Almost all of them seemed genuinely happy to participate, and many of them sent me handwritten notes, recipes, menus for special occasions, and even an invitation to dinner! Information about income, marital status, length of residency in the state, and ethnicity would have added to the research, but I felt that such requests for private information would have lowered the rate of response significantly. All but two of the menus were for home-cooked meals. Although home cooking was not specified in the instructions, the task was obviously interpreted as such by respondents, thereby making an association between hospitality and home and providing a rare view into what people serve in their homes.

References


