

Dining in America

A guide for Non-native English speakers

By

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America is a land of immigrants. People from countries all over the world have come to live in America, and they brought their national dishes with them. Because of this, America offers a diverse selection of meals and restaurants. Many dishes have names that are pronounced differently than they look. This is because we have adopted the name used in its original language.

This book is divided into eight helpful sections. The first two sections talk about restaurants in America: the different types, what to expect, and how to behave. The next four sections deal with types of foreign foods that you will discover in America and their vocabulary. After that are sections on dining with other Americans in a non-restaurant environment, and eating on American holidays. Bon appetit!

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Types of Restaurants

Americans love to eat, and they eat restaurant food much more frequently than people from other countries. There are several types of restaurants in America. Here are the basic types.

Fast food- Fast food refers to restaurants where food is either already prepared or is prepared quickly enough that a customer has their food within minutes of ordering. Most fast food restaurants are chain restaurants. At most fast food places, you can choose to dine in the restaurant or get “take out” (or get your food “to go”). One way of getting food “to go” is to use the drive thru. Most fast food is unhealthy if you eat a lot of it, but it is a good option once in a while when you are too busy or tired to cook and are in a hurry. Some well known American fast food restaurants are: McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, Taco Bell, KFC, Arby’s, and Long John Silver’s.

Take out/ “to go”- Using this option means food is packaged for you to take with you so you can eat is elsewhere.

Drive thru- This is an option at some restaurants where a customer pulls up alongside the restaurant in their car and places their order at a window or into speakers. Then the customer drives forward to a window to pay and pick up their order. Americans do this when they are in a hurry and don’t want to stop and get out of their car. Some Americans eat while driving, though this is not recommended as it poses a safety hazard.

Delivery- With this option, customers call the restaurant and place their order over the phone. The restaurant then delivers the food to the customer’s home. Customers should tip the delivery person.

Chain restaurant- A chain restaurant is owned by a corporation. These restaurants are found across the country, go by the same name, and offer the same menu regardless of where the restaurant is located. For example, you can find a McDonald’s restaurant in almost every city and town in America. At every McDonald’s, hamburgers, cheeseburgers, fries, chicken nuggets, and Coca-Cola are on the menu. Chain restaurants can be fast food or sit down. Some famous American chain restaurants besides the fast food restaurants listed earlier are: Applebee’s, Chili’s, TGI Friday, Olive Garden, and Sizzler.

Mom and Pop restaurant- This is the opposite of a chain restaurant. ‘Mom and Pop’ describes a single restaurant run by an individual or a couple. These usually have a relaxed feel to them and the menu usually features “homestyle” food.

Buffet- At buffets, a large variety of food sits on a counter and customers serve themselves from the selection. Often buffets are “all you can eat,” meaning customers can go back and refill their plate as often as they like. Sometimes people use the word ‘smorgasbord’ instead of buffet.

Sit down restaurant- A sit down restaurant is any restaurant other than a fast food restaurant where you dine at the restaurant rather than get takeout. At many sit down restaurants an employee will seat you, that is, you do not choose where you sit. When you are seated, a waiter

or waitress will introduce themselves by name and give you a menu. They will leave you for a few minutes while you decide what you want then come back and take your order. For more on interacting with your waiter/waitress, see the etiquette section.

The Deli

Sandwiches are popular because many Americans see them as a healthy alternative to fast food, and they are easy to make and very portable. A sandwich usually consists of meat and vegetables between two slices of bread. Delis are restaurants where you order sandwiches. Delis often offer different kinds of bread: white, rye, whole wheat, Kaiser rolls or bagels. “Lunch meat,” as it is called is processed and sliced thin so it can be folded on a sandwich. Delis will have a list of sandwich options but most places will let you build your own sandwich. Subway is a chain deli where you request exactly which toppings you want on your sandwich. Typical sandwich meats are chicken, turkey, roast beef, salami, and ham. Typical toppings include sliced cheeses, tomato, onion, pickles, lettuce, and various condiments like mayonnaise and mustard. A sub is a long sandwich usually between 6”-12” long. (It is shaped like a submarine, hence its name.) Other words you may hear instead of sub are hoagie, hero, grinder.

Some sandwiches are served hot, sometimes with the bread toasted as well. The most popular of these is a grilled cheese sandwich. Other sandwiches that are toasted are called panini.

Perhaps the most popular American sandwich is peanut butter and jelly. Schoolchildren often carry this sandwich to school for lunch. It is rarely found on restaurant menus, although you may come across it occasionally.

The Pizzeria

Pizza is one of the most popular foods in America. American pizzas (like the rest of our servings) tend to be larger than what you would find elsewhere. Pies are usually 14”-16” in diameter, though you can order “personal” pizzas as well. Every pizza is made to order, so you decide what toppings you want. Typical topping choices include: tomatoes, pepperoni, ham, mushrooms, onion, sausage, green pepper, black olives. Other toppings you may come across include: bacon, ground beef, green olives, pineapple, anchovies, spinach, broccoli. Many pizza places offer specialty pizzas with certain ingredients. For example, a “Hawaiian” pizza may come with ham and pineapple or a “meat lover’s” pizza may come with ham, bacon, sausage and pepperoni. You can order one of these or create your own pizza. Perhaps you want a pizza with only black olives, for example.

There are all kinds of pizza places. There are chain restaurants like Pizza Hut, Little Caesar’s, Dominoes, Papa John’s. And there are mom and pop pizza places. There are even pizza buffets. In some cities like Chicago, there are restaurants that serve deep dish pizza. This pizza you must eat with a fork because it is so thick. It is acceptable and customary to eat regular pizza with your hands. Most often, people order pizza delivery. Almost every pizza restaurant offers delivery and pizza is seen as an ideal food to have delivered for parties (see

Super Bowl) or for after a long day of manual labor. For example, when people move to a new house, they usually enlist the help of their friends with an offer of pizza for dinner afterward.

Below is an example of a menu for a sit-down restaurant.



ENTREES

served with choice of two sides

8 oz. Sirloin Steak.....12.95
 Fettuccini Alfredo.....9.95
 Pork Chops.....10.95

Grilled Chicken Breast.....9.95
 Quesadillas.....8.95
 with chicken.....9.95
 Grilled Salmon.....9.95

SANDWICHES

served with your choice of side

Tuna Melt.....5.95
 Club Sandwich.....6.95
 Turkey Breast.....6.95

SIDES

Mashed Potatoes.....1.95
 Steamed Vegetables.....2.95
 Rice.....1.95
 French Fries.....1.95
 Coleslaw.....1.95

DRINKS

Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Root Beer,
 Mt. Dew (free refills).....1.95
 Coffee, tea.....1.50
 Milk.....1.95
 Juice (orange, apple, cranberry).....2.50

DESSERTS

Chocolate Cake.....2.95
 Ice Cream Sundae.....4.95
 Pie (apple, cherry).....3.95
 a la mode.....4.95

Restaurant Etiquette

Interacting with your waiter/waitress- Unlike wait staff in some countries, your waiter will check on you periodically to see if you need anything and will often bring you your bill without your asking for it. If you find you need to get your waiter's attention, *never* snap your fingers. Wait until he is near and call him by his name. It is important to be polite and use polite phrasings. For example, do NOT say "bring me more napkins" or "we need more napkins." DO say, "could I have some more napkins, please?" or, if you have called your waiter over, "I'm sorry, but could we have some more napkins?"

You will find that Americans (and the English) say "I'm sorry" for things they don't really need to apologize for. That is because they are painfully polite. Don't be surprised if *you* bump into someone and *they* say they are sorry. You should say "sorry" any time you even mildly inconvenience someone. This is true everywhere, not just in restaurants.

Remember to say "thank you" whenever your waiter brings you anything or helps you in any way.

It is expected that you leave a tip of at least 15% of your total bill for your waiter. Just leave the money on the table as you leave. Do not calculate exactly 15%, just round up. For example, if your bill is \$23.58, 15% would be \$3.54. Just leave \$4. It's considered rude to leave pennies as part of a tip.

In many restaurants, an automatic tip (or gratuity) is added to a party of more than 10 or so people. And in a few restaurants, a tip or gratuity is automatically added regardless of party size. Be sure to check your bill for it. Don't confuse that with tax, though. Every restaurant charges tax, even fast food restaurants.

If you have not finished all your meal, you can request a "doggie bag" or box to take you leftovers home in. Many Americans do this because they can get two meals out of their order and it is easy to reheat their food in their microwave at home.

Other things to keep in mind- Never speak loudly in a restaurant. The people at tables near you shouldn't be able to know what you're saying.

Do not use your hands to eat anything unless you see others doing so. A few examples of foods that are acceptable to eat with your hands are, chips, sandwiches, fries, onion rings, pizza.

If you are sharing a dish with someone, scoop your share onto your plate. Do not eat out of a communal bowl or plate with a utensil that has been in your mouth. Do not dip anything that has been in your mouth into a communal dish. For example, if your table is given chips and salsa as a starter, do not dip your chip into the salsa, take a bite and dip the remainder of the chip into the salsa. This is called "double-dipping" and is considered unsanitary and rude.

French Influence

French is very important in the English language. About 30% of our words come from the French language. Many of these words have since been Anglicized, that is, they are now spelled and pronounced in an “English” way rather than a French one. However, some French words and phrases have maintained their spelling and pronunciation. This is especially true in the culinary world. Even in restaurants that are not “French,” you will find French culinary words. The word “cuisine” itself is French and many people consider French cuisine to be among the best in the world. When we want to wish someone a pleasant eating experience we say “bon appetit,” which is French. Here are some French foods and phrases you may run across.

Bisque (bisk)- Thick, creamy soup made from shellfish

Coq au vin (coke a vahn)- Chicken cooked in wine.

Crème brulee (krem broo lay)- A custard dessert with a caramelized crust on top.

Crouton (kroo tahn)- Hard toasted bread squares used on salads as a topping.

Crudités (kroo duh tay)- Bites of raw vegetables usually served with a dip as an hors d’oeuvre.

Escargot (es car go)- Snails.

Filet mignon (fil ay min yon)- Thick cut of beef tenderloin.

Hors d’oeuvre (or derv, this is technically a mispronunciation from the French, but is the way it is pronounced in America)- Appetizers.

Meringue (mer ang)- Eggs whites and sugar beaten stiff, usually tops a pie like lemon meringue.

Mousse (moose)- A chilled dessert of egg and gelatin.

Parfait (par fay)- Ice cream layered with fruit or cake served in a tall glass.

Pate (pa tay)- A meat paste or spread.

Quiche (keesh)- Hot custard pie made with cheese, spinach, etc.

Soufflé (soo flay)- A dish made light and fluffy by being baked with beaten egg whites.

In addition to foods, the French have given several words and phrases related to food preparation and the dining experience. Here are some you should familiarize yourself with.

A la mode- Served with ice cream.

Au gratin (oh grah tin)- In French “au gratin” means with gratings, but in America it is used to mean “with cheese.”

Au jus (oh zhoo)- With juice. The juice here is what comes from meat while cooking and it is offered as a side for some sandwiches to be dipped in.

Bistro (bee stro)- A small café.

Du jour (doo zhoor)- Of the day. Usually used in “soup du jour” when restaurants change what soup is available daily.

Flambé (flahm bay)- Served with flaming rum.

Sauté (saw tay)- Fry quickly in a little fat or oil.

Italian Influence

Italian is one of the most popular types of cuisine in America, especially when you consider how much pizza alone Americans eat each year. Italian food is easy, inexpensive, and what Americans call “comfort food,” that is, food that you eat when you are sad or depressed and want to feel better. Many Italian food words are types of pasta that differ in shape but not taste. Here are some foods with Italian names and some Italian dishes.

Bologna (bal oh nee)- A processed lunch meat.

Broccoli (bra kolee)- A green, cruciferous vegetable

Bruschetta (broo skeh ta)- Small rounds of toast topped with tomatoes and seasonings.

Lasagna (la zahn ya)- Wide noodles baked with layers of ground meat, cheese, tomato sauce.

Maraschino (mair ah shee no)- A cherry in syrup, usually used to top a sundae.

Minestrone (meen ah stroh nuh) A vegetable soup, usually with pasta and beans.

Oregano (or egg ah no)- An herb used in Italian cooking.

Pastrami (pa stra mi)- An Italian spiced, smoked beef.

Salami (sa la mi)- An Italian spiced, salted sausage.

Zucchini (zoo ki ni)- Cucumber-like squash.

Spanish Influence

Mexican food is also very popular in the U.S. It is different from Spanish food but uses the Spanish language. Here I'll focus on Mexican food as that's what you'll encounter the most, but I'll mention a few Spanish items you may come across. Here are some foods and dishes from the Spanish language.

Avocado (ah vo cah doh)- Thick-skinned tropical fruit with buttery flesh.

Burrito (bur ee toe)- A tortilla wrapped or folded into a roughly cylindrical shape to completely enclose a filling of beans or meat.

Enchilada (an cha la da)- A tortilla rolled around a filling and covered with a chili pepper sauce.

Fajita (fa hee ta)- Grilled meat, onions, and bell peppers served with tortillas.

Gazpacho (gahz pa cho)- Cold Spanish vegetable soup.

Guacamole (gua ca mo lee)- Dip made from avocado.

Jalapeno (ha la pay nyo)- A variety of spicy pepper.

Nachos (nah chos)- Tortilla chips topped with cheese, tomatoes, meat, sour cream, etc.

Paella (pie ay uh)- Spanish dish of rice with mussels, shrimp, etc.

Quesadilla- (kay sa dee uh) A tortilla filled with cheese and other ingredients, then folded in half to form a half-moon shape.

Taco (tah co)- Folded fried tortilla filled with meat.

Tamale (ta mah lee)- Spicy chopped meat wrapped in dough of cornmeal.

Tortilla (tor tee uh)- Flat, unleavened bread made from wheat or corn.

Other International Food

Many other cuisines have found their way to American shores. In large U.S. cities (and even in most small ones) you could find any or all of the following cuisines: Chinese, Indian, Greek, Thai, Japanese, Middle Eastern, and more. The U.S. even has its own blends of cuisine such as Cajun and Tex-Mex.

Chinese food is very popular because it is quick and tasty and one can usually find a restaurant that delivers. In Chinese restaurants you can choose to eat your food with chopsticks or a fork.

Chinese food in America isn't exactly like the food you will find in China and the fortune cookie (which you will get with every meal you order) is actually an American invention. But there are a few Chinese words you should know.

Chop Suey- meat and eggs cooked quickly with vegetables in a sauce

Chow Mein- stir-fried noodles

Kung pao chicken- chicken stir-fried with vegetable and peanuts, seasoned with chili peppers and peppercorns

Szechuan- a style of Chinese cooking that originated in the Sichuan Province. Ingredients used include peanuts, sesame paste and ginger. It is generally spicy.

Wok- a deep pan used in Chinese cooking, you may often see it as part of a Chinese restaurant's name.

Kosher is a term that applies to food that is acceptable for practicing Jews to eat according to their religion. America is home to the largest Jewish population outside of Israel. In communities with a Jewish population you may find kosher delis. Kosher laws are similar to halal laws, and you will not find pork in a kosher deli. You'll also run into the word 'kosher' as a way of saying something is okay. A person may ask "is that kosher?" in reference to an action for example. They are asking if it is legal or socially acceptable to do that thing.

Here are several other foods, where they come from, what they are and pronunciation (if needed).

Goulash- Hungarian- Macaroni with ground meat, tomatoes and paprika.

Gyro- (yeer oh)- Greek- meat (traditionally lamb) with cucumber yogurt sauce, onion and tomato wrapped in a thick flat bread.

Hummus- Middle Eastern- dip made of pureed chickpeas, garlic, lemon, tahini (sesame)

Jambalaya- Cajun/Creole- rice with spices, beans, meat (usually sausage and seafood)

Naan- (nahn), Indian- flat bread

Pirogi- (peer ohgee), Polish- potato dumplings

Pita- Middle Eastern- pocket bread

Sushi- Japanese- any Japanese preparation of bite-size seafood, usually raw and usually served with rice and seaweed.

Eating Outside of Restaurants

Potluck- A potluck is a lunch or dinner where each person is asked to bring a “dish to pass.” Potlucks are common at churches, places of work, and any gathering where there will be many people. You may be told which category of food to bring (e.g. salad, entrée, dessert) or not. You may also be asked to bring your own tableware (plate, utensils, etc.), otherwise, expect to eat off paper plates and use plastic utensils. Never eat anything with your hands unless you see other adults doing it. A potluck is like the home version of a buffet.

Picnic- Picnics are meals eaten outside, usually somewhere scenic like a park or mountainside or river bank. A picnic is usually an intimate meal between 2-4 people, though it can be larger. Picnic food is portable and carried in a picnic basket. A large blanket is spread on the ground for people to sit on while they eat.

Dinner Party- If you are invited to someone’s house for dinner, this is what you can expect. You may be the only guest or you may be one of a few guests (usually up to 8). Your host or hostess will seat you at a table and serve you. Do not begin eating until your host begins. It is acceptable (and sometimes expected) that you bring a small gift for your host such as flowers or a bottle of wine.

Finger Food- is any food that is acceptable to eat with your hands. Finger food includes hors d’oeuvres, chips, cookies, pizza, nachos, popcorn, etc. Sometimes you’ll be asked to bring finger food to a potluck or an invitation may just inform you that finger foods will be served. If a function is serving finger foods, it means you will not be formally seated anywhere and may end up not sitting at all. Finger foods are used for gatherings where people are encouraged to mingle. The expectation is that you will walk about the room(s) meeting and talking with several people. Finger foods allow you to eat a few nibbles while doing this.

Brunch- This meal is halfway between breakfast and lunch, hence its name. Brunch is usually served between 11am and 2pm. You’ll run into brunch at some business conferences, fundraisers, or weddings. It’s usually considered a semi-formal affair. You can expect to find eggs and breakfast meats like bacon or ham at a brunch.

Eating on American Holidays

Super Bowl Party- held in February, the primary reason for this party is to watch the Super Bowl, which is the biggest sporting event of the year in America. It is the final game of the season for American football (not to be confused with soccer), and even people who aren’t football fans watch it. Some people watch it specifically for the commercials, which are usually the funniest of the year. Typical fare at Super Bowl parties includes: pizza, chicken wings, nachos, burgers, chips, beer, and pop.

Valentine's Day (February 14)- This holiday celebrates love, especially romantic love. There's no traditional Valentine's meal. Couples go out to dinner so don't expect to be able to eat at a sit down restaurant unless you've made reservations. People exchange chocolate and other sweets.

St. Patrick's Day (March 17)- This is an Irish holiday, but the traditional American meal served on St. Pat's is actually influenced by the Jewish/Eastern European population that lived alongside the Irish immigrants in the New World. In Ireland, the dish served was cabbage with bacon. In the New World, poor Irish immigrants learned how to corn beef, a process in which beef is brined so a cheaper cut is made tender and tasty. In America, we eat corned beef and cabbage and drink green beer on St. Pat's. And now, the Irish in Ireland have adopted the American version of the meal!

Easter (late March or April)- Easter is a religious holiday but is widely celebrated in the U.S. even by non-Christians. The traditional Easter dinner is ham. Americans also eat lots of chocolate rabbits and jelly bean candy. Eggs are hard-boiled and dyed different colors.

Cinco de Mayo (May 5)- This is a Mexican holiday celebrating their defeat of the French in 1862, *not* their Independence Day. It's only celebrated in certain parts of Mexico and is actually more popular in the U.S. because we will use any excuse to have a party and eat. Americans not of Mexican descent celebrate simply by having a dinner or party where Mexican food is served.

4th of July- This is Independence Day in the U.S. It is a federal holiday. We celebrate by having a BBQ. Americans eat hot dogs and hamburgers, baked beans, potato salad, and corn on the cob. Some Americans grill other foods like steak, shrimp or vegetables as well.

Labor Day (first Monday in September)- see 4th of July for food eaten.

Halloween (October 31)- There's no traditional meal for Halloween but large amounts of candy are consumed. At parties, expect to eat finger food.

Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in November)- This is a federal holiday celebrating the Pilgrims' survival of their first winter in the New World. The traditional Thanksgiving dinner consists of roast turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce and a number of other side dishes plus pumpkin pie for dessert.

Christmas (December 25)- This is a federal holiday even though it is a Christian holiday. Most Americans celebrate, even if they are not Christian. If you find yourself in America in the month of December, don't be surprised if you're invited to several Christmas parties, most of which will serve finger foods including many sweets. If you are invited to a Christmas dinner you will most likely find turkey, ham, or goose on the menu along with several side dishes similar to Thanksgiving. If you have the opportunity, try some of the drinks offered only at Christmastime like eggnog, hot apple cider, or wassail.

New Year's Eve (December 31)- People have New Year's Eve parties where they serve finger foods. It is one of the biggest times of the year for alcohol consumption. It is best to avoid being on the roads this night as there is an increase in drunk driving.