advertising campaigns have had a family motif and have focused on presenting wine as socially acceptable and desirable in family settings. Inglenook Wines, for example, has a current ad campaign with scenarios of emotional family occasions and an appeal, "When the toast comes from your heart, say it with Inglenook Wines."

As the fast food business has made eating routinized, the efforts of the wine industry to reach a mass market have resulted in the de-mystification of wine. With instant wine knowledge, the consumer now needs to know very little about serving temperature, food appropriateness or vintage. He need only remember the brand name. After all, "Blue Nun" goes with everything!

Notes

3Ibid., p. 4.

Toward a Culinary Common Denominator: The Rise of Howard Johnson's, 1925-1940

Warren J. Belasco

There's many a king on a gilded throne
But there's only one king on an ice-cream cone.
So we crown him today with friendly acclaim,
All over the country we'll blazon his name.
With hotdogs barking in approbation,
He's the man who believes he can feed the nation.

Written: N.Y., Howard Johnson's, 1940.1

Originally a New England ice cream peddler, Howard Johnson gained national recognition when he opened a string of orange-roofed "roadside cathedrals" along the East Coast in the late 1930s. Starting in 1925 with a small soda fountain in a Wollaston, Massachusetts, drugstore, Johnson ran an empire of over one hundred stores by 1940. Johnson capped his success by winning an exclusive food service contract along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which opened its initial 160-mile stretch in 1940. This partnership with "America's Dream Road"—the nation's first superhighway—proved a public relations coup, for it identified Johnson with the forces of progressive engineering. From this base he went on to win other lucrative franchises during the postwar tollroad-building boom. Just as the turnpike opened a new era in motoring,2 Johnson's restaurants marked a new era in public dining. Just as turnpike travel was safe, smooth, well-graded and predictable, Johnson's mass-produced food was sanitary, easily digested and thoroughly consistent. Both road and restaurant limited options and variety for the sake of security and efficiency. Both would be reduplicated after the war; if the road prefigured the interstate highway, the restaurant was the model for Hot Shoppes, Stuckeys, and, most important, McDonald's. In short, by certifying public confidence in the Johnson system, the Pennsylvania Turnpike deal signified the birth of the now familiar nationalized road-food complex.

The standardization of roadside food was part of a broader Depression-era cultural trend. As Warren I. Susman argues in his useful essay on the 1930s, much of that decade's intellectual life was inspired by an almost desperate search for a common "American Way of Life." Faced with economic and social disintegration, writers sought broad cultural unities that would restore a sense of shared national identity and purpose. Rejecting the alienated-dissenting stance of the previous decade, intellectuals emphasized commitment over criticism, conformity over individuality. At the popular culture level, films, games, popular
psychology and song lyrics all tended to stress group participation, mainstream values, historical continuities and, by the end of the decade, a conservative nationalism. In diet, the appetite followed the mind’s quest for synthesis. The result was a corporately-catered culinary common denominator: a compromise cuisine that was served in a quasi-colonial, "old-fashioned" setting, but tasted the same everywhere...everywhere along the road, that is.

It was no accident that dietary homogeneity was closely linked to automobility, for it was during this period that the car was elevated to an unquestioned emblem of the "American Way." During the boom years of the 1920s, when car ownership had expanded from under seven million (1919) to over twenty-three million (1929), the automobile’s meaning had been more ambiguous. Almost overnight city streets had become clogged with noisy, polluting, dangerous traffic. With over seventy traffic deaths daily in 1927, it had been unclear whether the car was man’s benefactor, or, in the words of one worried editor, a "self-created monster." In search of fresh air and country peace, Sunday drivers littered the roadside, tangled with angry farmers and killed animals in the road. Parents worried about the car’s impact on their children’s morals. Traditionalists lamented the destruction of work incentives by easy installment credit and cheap gas. Viewing the rising tide of auto-borne migrants, social workers and politicians feared that the automobile was creating a permanently roving proletariat whose rootlessness threatened basic American values of home and family.

In the early 1930s, however, such fears tended to disappear from public discussion. The newly "streamlined" automobile now provided needed reassurance of continued affluence and technological progress. Automobile traffic and safety came to be seen as simple matters of engineering, not politics or morality. The working-class whose automobility had seemed antithetical to traditional work values now appeared to be comfortably conservative in its firm attachment to this prime consumer good. And where else but America could the unemployed drive to the relief office or halfway across the country in search of new opportunities? The same migrants in battered used cars who had loomed so ominously in the 1920s were now portrayed as family-loving, achievement-oriented pioneers on a traditional American quest.

Perhaps most comforting, while most economic indicators plunged, recreational touring declined hardly at all. Journalists looking for hopeful signs found one in the fact that millions of American families continued to hit the road each Sunday and each summer. That tourists came together on the road was perhaps even more comforting; here was proof of shared experience, outlook and purpose. "The touring world is democratic, especially in, or shortly after, a major depression," one New York Times writer exulted. In the 1920s touring writers had looked for dissonance and diversity on the road; in the 1930s they looked for "the people," the "American tourist," as if there were only one type. In the '20s "all kinds" had implied class and regional differences; now it signified uniformity. On the road, motorists were Americans First. This identification of the road with national unity helped to marshal public support for the massive road building and park development programs of the New Deal.

During this period the roadside strip began to take its nationally familiar form. Today it is viewed as a blight; in the 1930s it could be seen as a boon. The roadside gas station, motor court or food stand was a common meeting ground, a place where travelers gathered and lived communally. Its appearance and manners constituted a common American language. "Oh, yes, you know this road; and you know this roadside," a 1934 Fortune article began. Illustrating the period’s wholistic-cultural aspirations, Fortune termed "the Great American Roadside" a major "American institution," a basic cultural building block, a "vital and inseparable part of the whole organism"—the road—that bound "the American people." "America hobnobs at the tourist camp," one New York Times writer observed. "All America, in the course of time, rolls up their little concrete drive and goes to bed in their cabins," Harper’s agreed. Road life revived cherished ideals of fellowship and community. "Something of the old fellowship of the road is being reborn in these places." Also, as an "oasis" in an arid economic landscape, the booming roadside seemed to prove that the business system still worked. Here was a place where the small time entrepreneur could start from scratch and make it big.

More than just a political symbol, the roadside actively promoted consumer allegiances that would ultimately benefit the large national corporation. Herein lay the roadside’s special fascination for publications like Fortune, Nation’s Business and Advertising and Selling. Although most roadside businesses were small and independently operated, business writers noted a definite trend toward the use of national brand products. In the earlier days of motoring, few had ventured out of their own region; by the late 1920s, tourists were taking longer trips. Fearing the unfamiliar, many looked for the same products they saw advertised at home: Standard Oil, Simmons Beautyrest mattresses, Coca Cola, Palmolive, Nabisco. Stocking name brands helped roadside vendors reach across regional boundaries and communicate with the long-distance traveler. As Daniel Boorstin put it, the brand name joined consumers in a “consumption community” that made travelers feel at home wherever they happened to be. The national chain, with its familiar logo, seemed the next step. Indeed, as early as 1929 several large oil companies were developing plans for coast-to-coast motor court chains very similar to the post-1945 Travelodge and Holiday Inn. But the idea was still a bit premature. The most affluent tourists still stayed at hotels, court operators were still unsure of customer preferences, and the economic collapse soon precluded any large-scale investments in a still experimental field.

The roadside food market was more promising, however, for food was a more essential commodity than lodging. Not everyone took overnight trips, but most tourists did stop at some point for an ice cream cone or hot dog. After gasoline and oil, food was the tourists’ main expenditure. And in food the need for a secure national standard was very great. Tourists might tolerate variability in beds and baths, but their food tastes were less flexible. People are conservative about trying unfamiliar foods, particularly when they first venture far from home. National travel in a pluralistic society virtually required the establishment of a lowest common denominator in food, lest unification be inhibited. Enter Howard Johnson.
Although Howard Johnson’s restaurants represented a major roadside advance, it would be wrong to exaggerate the discontinuities with what had come before. Indeed, just as intellectuals were anxious to reconcile the tensions of the 1920s, so were roadside entrepreneurs eager to harmonize the disparate, often contradictory, impulses of the motoring experience that had emerged in the 1920s. Johnson’s achievement came more as a synthesizer than as an innovator.

What were these major motor ideals and how did Johnson’s predecessors fail to resolve them?

The Romance of the Road

First, motoring was often described as a family experience. Coming at a time when many worried about family dissolution, the automobile vacation was the first full expression of the emerging “companionate family” ideal, in which families were to play together in regenerative intimacy. However disconnected at home, family members had little choice but to interact and cooperate once on the road in a small, confined space. Countless articles and advertisements promoted motoring as a way to save the family.11

This family ideal posed special problems for roadside businessmen. Unlike railroads and commercial hotels, which catered largely to men, and unlike summer resorts, which catered largely to women and children, the roadside business had to appeal to the whole family. In food, this meant a pleasant atmosphere, an uncontroversial menu and an absolute proscription of alcoholic beverages. Special attention had to be paid to the wife-and-mother, for she generally decided where to stop on the basis of pleasantness and hygiene. In the filling station business this meant well-advertised rest rooms and, in the 1930s, a white tiled exterior suggesting hospital-like cleanliness and reliability. For tourist cabins it meant such amenities as flush toilets and window boxes with flowers. This feminine pitch was particularly important in food, since women generally served as culinary “gatekeepers” for the whole family; that is, women selected and prepared what everyone else ate. Many early roadside entrepreneurs were, in fact, women: middle-class ladies charmed by the small business mystique, or farm wives whose stands or cabins began as extensions of their “egg money” operations. Since women seemed to know best how to serve families, even male roadside restaurateurs usually hired waitresses and hostesses, instead of the traditionally male help.12

Related to this family orientation was a demand for homelike accommodations: informal, intimate, comfortable, domestic. To some extent, this preference reflected motorist insecurity. As many travelers ventured far from home for the first time, they sought a reassuring “home away from home” on the road. Novices might be intimidated by the stylized etiquette and brisk impersonality of the traditionally formal hotel dining room. Professional waiters had little patience for those who stumbled over the standard French menu, did not know how to ask for service, and, worst of all, did not know how to tip, which was a learned art in itself. Roadside menus were in plain English, service was less ceremonious, and, according to general practice, waitresses did not have to be tipped as much—if at all.13

But there was more to it than simple insecurity, for the “home” sought on the road was often quite different from that actually found at home. This brings us to another major motoring theme: the search for the old-fashioned.

Although the automobile was a modern machine, it was frequently perceived in nostalgic terms. To a generation raised on the railroad, the train—not the car—represented Modern Times: massive machinery, monopolistic corporations, urban clutter. The train schedule seemed indifferent to individual needs and the train ride itself was impersonal, insulated and, in its mechanical predictability, rather dull. The car, on the other hand, promised a suburban-style escape to a pre-industrial golden age. Traveling as a close unit in a cramped space along winding, bumpy roads, tourists hoped to relive the adventurous trials of the supposedly well-knit pioneer family. Automobile promoters likened the motoring experience to coach travel, in which hardy voyagers stoically bore the discomforts of slow road travel and then stopped at small, intimate inns presided over by genial landlords, whose hearty hospitality contrasted sharply with the officious indifference of modern hotel clerks and waiters. In selecting their routes, sightseers generally avoided the industrial landscape that lined railroad tracks and gravitated instead toward small towns, colonial ruins and rustic rural retreats. The “historic” stopped in 1865; the more recent Victorian relic seemed fussy and depressing. While the fascination for the “old” was well-established by the early 1920s, the nationalism of the 1930s reinforced this interest in early American themes.14

For roadside businessmen this translated into a demand for informal service and a cheery, vernacular style that made the stranger feel like a welcome, but not-too-honored guest. Since most entrepreneurs were newcomers to public service, their eagerness to please generally combined effectively with their amateurishness to produce the desired effect. Architecture and decor posed a problem, however, for the “historic” could be anything from the gothic picturesque to the thatched Tudor to the early republican bungalow. Much depended on the class being served, yet this class differentiation raised a troublesome contradiction within the motor romance.

As suggested earlier, motoring was generally applauded as a democratic experience. On the road “all kinds” were said to meet in unaffected good fellowship, “Friendship at first sight the rule, outside the cities, they all are thoroughly acquainted by 7.” This camaraderie, too, was tied to older means of travel. The automobile seemed to restore “the wide and intimate acquaintances of the old stage-coach days.” “The automobile,” wrote literary critic Lewis Gannett, “brings us back to something of the old intimacies.” Motorists were able to “get back” to a “real sense of what this country and its people are.” Yet by the late 1920s, with more working-class tourists and semi-permanent migrants out on the road, it became clear that this democracy was a qualified one. Middle-class urbanites escaping teeming cities did not necessarily want to meet the same “types” they were fleeing. For roadside entrepreneurs seeking the best spenders, this meant a need to discriminate between “undesirables” and “the better class.” A profitable camp or stand had to be informal, cheerful, full of good companionship, yet also respectfully “safe” for middle-class
tourists. As we shall see shortly, much of the architectural experimentation of this period reflected the search for this "desirable" traveler.15

Roadside operators also had to accommodate certain special conditions imposed by road life. For example, service had to be fast. Despite their nostalgic longing for a slower, more "human" pace, motorists generally liked to "make time." Since motorists rarely slowed down in time to inspect a potential stopping place, a stand or inn had to be extensively advertised and easily seen from the road. This requirement put a premium on brash billboards and flamboyant architecture. A long, well-marked driveway facilitated high-speed access from the road. In order to save time, tourists liked to park their own cars right outside, rather than to find a garage or leave their cars to a servant. Inside, food had to be cooked and served quickly, without fuss. Weary, schedule-minded tourists had no patience for gracious elegance. The demand for speed thus favored self-service and fried food, which was easiest to prepare.16

Fast fried food also appealed to another part of the motor romance: the suspension of everyday domestic propertieS. Since the mid-nineteenth century, fast eating had been considered a vulgar American habit, and etiquette books had taken great pains to teach Americans how to eat in a more decorous manner. Moreover, after 1900 progressive nutritional theory considered fried food to be indigestible, fattening and generally unhealthy. Middle-class housewives also avoided frying because of its unpleasant, lingering odor. On the road, however, tourists briefly escaped such proscriptions. Not only did motoring mean unaccustomed freedom to go where you pleased, it also meant the freedom to eat how and what you liked. In effect, the quick roadside "bite," eaten with fingers from paper plates, was a return to frontier food "boiling," i.e. the hasty gobbling that was so often the target of genteel Victorian etiquette writers. And, even if it was bad for you, there was no doubt that fried food, with its delightful crispiness, tasted good. On the road one could indulge this weakness.17

For the nutrition-conscious, these possibly unhealthy aspects of the roadside diet were partially offset by the opportunity to buy fresh vegetables, eggs and milk along the way. City food seemed stale, tired and expensive. In traveling to the country, tourists could find good, old-fashioned, fresh, cheap food right at its sources. Furthermore, at a time when a small appetite was taken as evidence of serious illness, particularly tuberculosis, car proponents promised that a fast ride in fresh country air would revive appetites jaded by city living. The effects of "ozone" aside, it was clear that after making an early start, motorists usually were ravenous by noon. The successful restaurant thus had to serve generous portions.18

To summarize, motorists demanded food that was fast, fried, fresh and filling, all served in an ambience that was family-oriented, informal, picturesque and quasi-democratic. For early roadside restaurateurs this was a fairly large order to fill, and not until Howard Johnson did anyone come close to filling it.

Picnics, Tea Rooms, Food Stands, Diners

At first, private enterprise was slow to adapt to the automobile age. Since few families had eaten out, most existing restaurants did not know how to handle children. Therefore the first truly family-oriented eating arrangements were individualistic and noncommercial: picnics and campfire dinners. By preparing their own food, tourists were assured of reliable, inexpensive meals that were informal and picturesque. Selecting a pretty spot, setting up, sprawling on the ground, cleaning up—all fostered a pleasant family intimacy. Eating "catch-as-catch-can without table or napery," tourists enjoyed a refreshing sense of truancy. Freed from normal constraints and etiquette, some romantics likened themselves to gypsies and vagabonds. Bacon and eggs, fried potatoes and beans were favorites; in wilderness areas would be Thoreaus might try their luck at a roadside trout stream. Those preferring speed and convenience ate sandwiches or heated cans over small camp stoves or on the car radiator.19

But there were drawbacks. Some women disliked canned beans, which were considered male camper fare; others were distressed by the continual frying, which seemed to leave a "dark brown taste" in the mouth. Yet they also disliked the drudgery of preparing more elaborate, balanced meals, for they, too, hoped for a brief respite from home chores. For mileage-conscious drivers, preparing and cleaning up after meals took away valuable road time. Furthermore, the roadside picnic produced an ugly litter problem, which the mass media tended to blame on lower class "undesirables." Also many farmers resented the roadside squatters, who frequently stole crops, picked flowers, uprooted shrubs, and even milked the cows. By the late 1920s it was no longer respectable to be seen eating out of cans by the side of the road.20

Not all tourists cared about respectability, of course. For many, the roadside picnic may have been a product of simple preference. As nutritionists have noted, food tastes are the last idiosyncratic habits to change when immigrants assimilate into a new culture.21 In the early 1920s most tourists—foreign or native born—were still newly arrived immigrants in the world of the Open Road. Rather than dine publicly in a strange new setting, many preferred to keep their own food and to eat privately. By 1930, however, after several years of experience, they were ready to try new tastes in a more exposed social arena, the public restaurant. And by 1930 there existed several kinds of establishments catering expressly to motorists. The most important were the tea room, the food stand and the diner. Each anticipated part, but not all, of the Howard Johnson synthesis.

Tea rooms actually achieved fad status in the early 1920s. Their early success perhaps reflected the greater confidence of their urbane, upper-middle-class clientele. Already familiar with city restaurants, and having picnicked and camped in rural areas before the war, these tourists were the first to make the jump from private to public road sides. Generally located in old farmhouses, renovated taverns or other "historic" buildings, tea rooms were the most overtly picturesque of roadside restaurants. With names like "Ye Ragged Robin," "The Sign of the Green Tea Pot," and "Lone Pine Inn," their lace-curtained, knotty-pined, candlelit interiors were "homelike" and "artistic." Almost always operated by women, they specifically sought the family trade. Indeed, the name "tea room" had prohibitionist, pro-family connotations—an alternative to the chophouse, roadhouse and speakeasy. Many specialized in fried chicken and waffles—
a favorite with Sunday touring parties. Others served light salads and sandwiches. Taking their tea in the parlor or on the front porch, travelers mingled in genteel conviviality. Some tea rooms also sold antiques, homemade candles and jams, and other arts-and-crafts products.22

Along with the obviously old-fashioned atmosphere, the tea room’s main strength was its ability to make the traveling women comfortable. But this could also be a disadvantage, for the pervasive femininity could unnerve men. Tea rooms soon gained a reputation for serving “dainty” meals that barely whetted the hungry male driver’s appetite. More troublesome, many tea room operators were rank amateurs whose enthusiasm for operating an independent business was not matched by a knowledge of restaurant management. Food was often overpriced and inconsistent. Few could adapt to the conditions of fast motoring; service was slow and inefficient. Since brash roadside advertising conflicted with the polite, subdued tone, tea rooms had difficulty attracting the speeding motorist. Finally, the “artistic” decor seemed a bit too Bohemian to less cosmopolitan tourists, while also failing to satisfy city dwellers seeking more overtly “folksy” fantasies. In short, the tea room was too refined, too specialized, a bit too elitist to capture a broad tourist market.

At the other end of the spectrum was the hot-dog, bar-b-que, Fried chicken or ice cream stand.23 Unashamedly vernacular in style, the “hot dog kennel” had immediate, egalitarian appeal. Owners were just plain-speaking “folks”—often farmers—with few pretensions. Most food was quickly prepared and consumed, fried, self-served and, if sold by a farmer, presumably fresh. Low overhead, reliance on family labor and keen competition kept prices low; virtually any tourist could afford a second helping. Motorists could eat right in their cars and make a fast, easy return to the highway. Not all hesitant to advertise profusely, stand owners quickly lined country roads with hand-painted signs whose slogans had a simple, populist charm:

They Have No Head and Can’t Walk,
But, OH BOY, Hot Dogs Talk.

Ptomaine Tommy.

Gas and Food.

Fill Up Your Vest
At the Cuckoo’s Nest.

You Bet. It’s Wet.

The Ham What Am.

Occasionally roadside wits mocked tearoom-inn pretensions, taking such names as “Dew Drop Inn” (a soft drink stand), “Chez Quick Lunch” (hot dogs) and “Ye Olde Grease Shoppe” (a filling station-cafe). In southern California, where touring was a year-round affair, some operators designed their stands to look like the products they sold; in the rest of country, however, the seasonal nature of the trade kept structures small and mobile—a few boards nailed together, a chicken coop converted into a primitive kitchen.

However amusing and refreshing, the quasi-anarchic flavor was also a vulnerability. By the late 1920s some middle-class tourists were beginning to complain of roadside clutter. Although large commercial billboards occupied more space, many critics tended to focus their complaints on the “vulgar” roadside stands, with their numerous small signs and ad hoc architecture. Urging city planners and state highway authorities to zone the “riff-raff” out of existence, beautification groups sponsored design competitions for “tasteful” neo-colonial chicken stands and gothic-lettered roadside signs.24 In the early ’30s, as public authorities took a more active interest in regulating tourism, state health departments began to pass potentially repressive inspection requirements. Many stands were in fact dangerously unsanitary; dysentery and typhoid were real travel hazards. Yet it was hard to police the stands scattered through rural areas, and few owners voluntarily undertook the desired health improvements. Greed and ignorance aside, the perennial threat of being bypassed in this age of constant highway re-routing discouraged the substantial investment required to meet modern sanitary codes. In the end it was up to the tourist whether to try a particular stand. Roadside dining thus remained a risky business throughout the 1930s. Indeed, one of the shared experiences of Fortune’s “Great American Roadside” was the indigestion likely to afflict the average American tourist. In earlier travel, bad food had been shrugged off by stoic aristocrats as an unavoidable fact of travel life, but now, given the family-health themes in auto touring, this danger could not be so easily tolerated.26

Somewhere in between the tea room and the dog kennel was the diner. Starting as a working-class “nickel lunch” in the late nineteenth century, the diner began to reach out to a wider clientele in the 1920s. By installing booths, hiring waitresses and adding salads and sandwiches, operators hoped to attract more women and middle-class businessmen. The newer diners were mass-produced by a few large companies whose interest in serving the family trade insured standardized, professional-caliber kitchens. Operated with assembly-line efficiency, diners had low overhead and lower prices. Food was simple, fast and relatively reliable, since most cooks had some restaurant experience or were trained by the dining car manufacturer as part of the purchase agreement. Gum-chewing waitresses bantered with customers and cooks in their own special urban-folk lingo: “Adam and Eve on a raft” (two poached eggs on toast), “grease spot” (hamburger), “hounds on an island” (franks and beans). Late at night, “all kinds”—trucker, clerks, well dressed theater-goers—were seen to “rub shoulders” along the diner’s egalitarian counter. For one journalist, the diner was “an American institution,” the “most democratic, and, therefore, the most American of all eating places.”27

Despite the enthusiastic publicity of the 1930s, several disadvantages prevented diners from becoming established nationally. First, although the diner’s architecture was nationally familiar, its trolley-railroad associations made widespread adaptation to the automobile era unlikely,
for much automobile propaganda was directed at streetcars and trains. Moreover, the diner lacked a rural-historic image. Nostalgia for the rail age did not appear until the 1960s; until then the diner was a bit too closely tied to the urban industrial environment that many tourists sought to avoid. Furthermore, well into the 1940s the working-class “tough mug” image remained a public relations problem, subjecting diners to the same beautification-zoning harassment that plagued roadside stands. Many middle-class tourists remained unconvinced that the old “lunch wagon” could be a decent family restaurant. Sadly, as operators further dressed up their decor and menus for the sake of respectability, the diner lost its special flavor and became just another mediocre roadside cafe.

Howard Johnson’s

In all motorists faced a roadside that was exciting in its variety yet dangerous in its eccentricity. The 1920s and early 30s were years of experimentation, as different entrepreneurs catered to different class and regional backgrounds. By 1929 we can see evidence of a search for a national standard: the growing use of brand name foods; a few tentative chain experiments—White Castle (not a roadside business), Deco hot dogs (upstate New York), Dutchland Farms (New England);29 and extravagant journalistic attention to the Great American Roadside. The Crash inhibited corporate chain expansion by drying up investment capital and tightening tourist budgets. By mid-decade, however, travelers began to spend more on meals and lodgings. While most tourist cabins in the early 30s provided cooking facilities, by the late 30s, when most tourists ate out, only ten percent featured kitchenettes.30

Even Howard Johnson, who opened his first ice cream stand in 1925, did not really catch on until 1935.31 Before then, he remained a struggling Boston-area small-timer ever on the verge of bankruptcy. But with the economic upswing, Johnson’s time had come. In 1935 he opened his first franchised restaurant in Orleans, Massachusetts. The next summer he opened thirty-nine more, making a sensation in the New England restaurant business. Branching southward, he opened twenty more in 1937, twelve in 1938 (a bad year), and fourteen in 1939. His 1940 “palace” along Long Island’s Queens Boulevard cost $600,000 to build, seated 1000, and was said to be the largest roadside restaurant in the world. By 1941, Johnson supervised over 150 restaurants, two-thirds of which were owned by franchisees who leased the name, bought his brand name products and, most important, religiously followed his system.

An examination of that system’s components reveals how skillfully it synthesized the disparate roadside themes—the tea room’s tasteful homeliness, the diner’s democracy and efficiency, the stand’s fast-fried formula—into a whole pitch that was both aggressive in its marketing strategy and safely conservative in its appeal to the middle-class tourist.

Thus the design, with its steeples, Simple Simon silhouettes, white stucco walls, green shutters, and overhanging eaves, seemed picturesque in a tea room fashion, but not excessively so. Like the Williamsburg style adopted by postwar motel chains, Johnson’s New England town hall/church was simpler, more disciplined than the eccentric tea room or the dilettantish roadside stand. In a sense Johnson’s architecture typified the conservative, “classical” reaction that often follows a more robust historical revival, as, for example, when the neo-Palladian replaced the Queen Anne in the late eighteenth century, or when the Beaux-Arts academic succeeded the neo-gothic in the late nineteenth.32 Emphasizing clarity and simplicity, Johnson achieved a unified, almost archetypically Colonial that appealed to tourists disoriented by the existing clutter of competing, often incongruous styles.

Yet Johnson was not just another revivalist. Unlike the more cautious tea room operators, who hesitated to advertise, Johnson’s pitch was well-adapted to high-speed automobile travel. Rather than renovate colonial inns or farmhouses, Johnson always started from scratch. His driveways were well-marked, his parking lots ample. An ardent practitioner of the modern traffic survey, he had a special flair for locating his restaurants on hills and along straight stretches where they could be seen far in advance, thus obviating the need for the repetitious signs that were displeasing to highway beautifiers. Johnson’s building itself was advertising enough. The white stucco walls, orange steeple, and neon “28 flavors” stood out for a mile, and the orange-blue tinge of his famed porcelain tile roof was, according to Business Week, “scientifically determined as the best shade for catching light and attracting attention,” especially when floodlit at night.33 His Pennsylvania Turnpike restaurants did not need such styling, however, for he had a monopoly; instead, each was patterned after local colonial stone architecture.

Leaving their cars, tourists entered an environment that was old-fashioned (New England prints, panelled walls, neo-colonial furniture, nostalgic gifts), homelike (hostesses, female cooks, children’s menus, no tipping, soft background music), yet safely standardized. Like the mass-produced diner, every Johnson restaurant was carefully designed by company architects for maximum kitchen efficiency. A tireless worker, Johnson oversaw every aspect of the operation. The company’s “Bible” detailed every procedure, from frying potatoes to cleaning washrooms. Undercover inspectors reported violations directly to the main office. Johnson thus employed the same central management techniques that had allowed Fred Harvey to standardize the Santa Fe’s catering system in the late nineteenth century.34 But Johnson soon outstripped Harvey, partly because he was not limited to fixed rail routes, but mainly because he did not personally own every outlet. Rather, through franchising Johnson was able to expand his system rapidly without having to finance every new restaurant. For $1500 a franchised dealer leased the right to operate according to the Johnson method. The central office furnished the architects, the managerial expertise, all the supplies, and the advertising and market research. Franchising thus retained the incentives and liabilities of independent entrepreneurship, while also expanding the influence of a large national corporation.35

Decor and strict management aside, Johnson could not have been so successful if his food had been of poor quality. But Johnson did not skimp on quality. By cutting costs through kitchen streamlining and discipline, he was able to spend a higher percentage of his gross on food than was
customary in the restaurant business—48% vs. an industry-wide average of 38%. Every Johnson product bore his personal brand. Unusually high in butterfat, his ice cream was made in company factories according to his mother’s “secret recipe”—a feature that made it seem home-made even as it was trucked in from regional plants. Johnson’s advertisements exploited the homely-family theme by displaying his smiling children, Dorothy and Howard, Jr., with the caption, “We love our Daddy’s ice cream.” Simplicity was another asset. Hot dogs were called frankfurters, a name that seemed almost quaintly respectful in this age of the dog kennels. Similarly uncomplicated was the plain, buttered and toasted bun, whose shape was more rough-hewn than the average hot dog roll. Although Johnson’s well-advertised “25 flavors” conjured up Open Road images of unlimited options, when it came to sales, standard old chocolate, strawberry and vanilla were most popular with the inherently conservative motoring public.

His fried clams, on the other hand, were a successful innovation that illustrated Johnson’s ability to influence food tastes. When Johnson introduced them at the New York World’s Fair in 1939 the public first hesitated to try what was up to then a strictly regional specialty (New England). But the dish soon caught on. Perhaps it was that they were fried yet new, and thus untainted by previous roadside experiences. As a sandwich they were easily eaten on the road—another plus. Johnson’s well-publicized personal contract with the clam diggers of Ipswich, Mass., seemed to guarantee freshness. Finally, Johnson’s personal reputation helped to overcome public distrust and to win new converts to this strange dish.

Like Henry Ford, Howard Johnson was a public relations artist. Like Ford, he built his corporate empire through thoroughly modern means—scientific management, assembly line mass production, horizontal integration—yet he gained public attention through a studied appeal to democratic ideals. Johnson carefully cultivated his eccentric populist image by continuing to run his growing domain out of a small, cluttered office behind his original soda fountain, by personally distributing free ice cream cones to children, and by boasting that he loved to pay taxes because he wanted to repay his debt to “the people.” Affectionately called “Buster,” Johnson seemed just an ordinary roadside stand owner who, through hard work and a bit of luck, had made good. Journalists generally related his success story in terms that had special appeal in hard times: here was a high school dropout who, burdened with his father’s bad debts, went on to overcome alcoholism, marital problems and personal insolvency to make a fortune by giving people what they seemed to want.

To a great extent he did give people what they wanted. His food was sanitary, reliable and popularly priced. The atmosphere was relaxed, escapist but controlled. Given what had come before, Johnson’s system seemed well-designed, smoothly scientific and thus well in tune with the decade’s tendency to equate mechanical efficiency with democratic progress. It was appropriate, therefore, that Johnson be chosen to cater the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which was generally hailed as a masterwork of populist engineering.

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But there were costs. Part of the earlier motor romance was gone. What had happened to the anti-modernist bias, the need for adventure and the unconventional? If the risks were gone, so were the surprises. For the challenging, albeit occasionally perilous diversity of earlier roadside fare, Johnson substituted a suave uniformity. For the quaint, if also singularly odd, homeyness of the tea room, Johnson substituted a banal antiquity that was easily duplicated in plastic and plywood. Gone too was the egalitarian spirit. For the erratic, vernacular architecture of the stand, Johnson substituted a hazy allusion to New England town democracy. Instead of eccentric Mama-Papa independents, Johnson offered anonymous dealers whose every move was orchestrated by a central office. There is no evidence that tourists interacted informally at his restaurants. Rather, most democratic hyperbole focused on Johnson himself—the man of “the people.” For the spontaneous camaraderie of the diner or filing station-cafe, Johnson substituted a cliched cult of personality. In all, tourists seeking a national community may have found one, but it was so generalized as to be ultimately elusive. Because the Howard Johnson “home away from home” was everywhere, it was nowhere.

Notes


6“Americans spent almost as much on gasoline, oil and other car operating expenses in 1933 ($1.04 billion) as in 1929 ($1.102 billion). With the slight upturn in 1935 these expenditures reached an all-time high: $1.31 billion. See Julius Weinberger, “Economic Aspects of Recreation,” Harvard Business Review, XV (Summer 1937), 462-63.


Hamburger Stand: Industrialization and the American Fast-Food Food Phenomenon

Bruce A. Lohof

In 1936 Charlie Chaplin unveiled one of the more famous of his satirical commentaries on life in the twentieth century. *Modern Times*, he called it—the movie and the century—and his protagonist was a factory worker who, standing at his station beside an assembly line, tightening a perpetual sequence of bolts, each with a single turn of a single wrench, monotonously abetted the replication of some standardized product. The movie was not named “best of the year” (an honor that went, instead, to a now-forgotten MGM film *The Great Ziegfeld*). But its setting did have a certain recognizable madness, which explains, one supposes, why Chaplin’s imagery has since become a cultural cliche.

The helpless pawn of standardized industrial forces was no Chaplinesque invention. Historians who viewed *Modern Times* knew its protagonist well. A century before Chaplin’s birth the handloom weavers of England had succumbed to Richard Arkwright’s power looms, even as their fellow in a myriad other callings had sooner or later fallen to a similar turn of events. And the same circumstances which Chaplin now attacked with pathos and satire had in all seriousness been confronted a hundred years earlier by the Luddites. Indeed, so compelling and ubiquitous had been the narrative that Chaplin’s themes—the subordination of the skilled artisan to the sophisticated mechanism, and the replacement of the unique item by the uniform product—became major leitmotifs in the history of the industrial revolution.

The times have changed now, and the West, at least, has moved through secondary and tertiary revolutions into what has often been characterized as a post-industrial condition. Still, the dichotomies of artisan-versus-mechanism and unique-versus-standardized, so central to the revolution of the nineteenth century, are extant here and there in Western culture. One such place, for instance, is suggested by *Modern Times* itself. For, as aficionados will recall, Chaplin had his masochistically submissive protagonist actually suggest that the mechanism of the factory might be further augmented by a feeding machine which would oblige the workers to eat without loss through downtime. The suggested machine, thought too complicated to be feasible, was rejected by management. But the most cursory glance at the American landscape—with franchised eateries standing cheek by jowl along every