From Servant to Master: The Chef’s Rise to Power in America

Jeffrey Miller

Abstract: Over the course of American history, the professional chef has risen from the lowest rungs of social status to celebrity prestige. This paper examines the rise in status of the chef from slave or indentured servant in the earliest days of colonial America to their current eminence. As America became one of the wealthiest and most powerful countries on the planet, interest in fancy food and its creators, the chefs rose steadily. Americans changed from being people who dined exclusively in their own homes or those of friends to people who relished dining out and following the latest in food and dining trends. After the Second World War, Americans of all social strata embraced food and dining as an expressive form of social consumption. The post-Julia Child era in America saw an explosion of interest in cuisine (as opposed to cookery) and led to the current fascination with chefs, restaurants, and distinctive foods. Cultural capital was acquired through knowledge and consumption of creative cooking and trendy foods. The chef was at the centre of this explosion. With the rise of Food TV and social media, the chef had made the final transition from servant to master.

The rise in status of the culinary professional in America between the arrival of English settlers in the 1600s and today could easily be the plot-line in a Horatio Alger book like Mark the Match Boy or Ragged Dick. An insignificant youth works hard, practices thrift, perseveres, and is finally noticed by the elite. Success follows. In the earliest days of Colonial America, a cook was to be neither heard nor seen. The culinary miracles were to be performed behind the scenes with no accolades to the chef. Today, celebrity chefs are everywhere you look. Chefs in America enjoy sport-star status with television shows, book contracts, product lines, and endorsement deals. At any given time there are 150 million Instagram food posts and 69% of millennials post pictures of their meals (McGuire, 2017). Food has become the new sex and chefs are the main drivers of this transformation.

The Colonial Era

In colonial America, nearly every person who identified as a chef or culinary professional was either a slave, an indentured servant, or a widow. Cooking was a defined occupational specialty by the time Europeans began migrating to the Americas. The British Emigration Registers for the second half of the 1600s show a number of men bound for the new world as 'cooks'. Most of these Europeans migrated as indentured servants with an average indenture period of 3.6 years (Shifflet, 2000). African slaves were also used as chefs, but most remained in chattel slavery for their entire lives. Being an excellent chef was one of the more reliable paths to manumission, but as a practice, manumission was highly restricted by legal codes in slave states, so actual numbers of manumissions remained extremely low throughout the time in which slavery was legal (Bourne, 2000).

Professional cooks in the colonial period primarily worked either in private homes or in taverns and inns. The quality of food was generally higher in private homes as the food served in taverns and inns was usually secondary to the lodging and alcohol business. Being a cook in a tavern, inn or for a private family was often one of the few professional avenues open to widows who needed income to support themselves and their families.

In the colonial period in North America, and really up until the American Civil War, the USA must be considered in two different lights. When the United States Constitution came into effect in 1789, there were eight slave states and only five free states. Free states came into the union at a faster pace than slave states, a cause for concern to slaveholders in the southern states that allowed the practice. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 sought to create a balance of free and slave states within the Union going forward and it was not until 1858 that free states outnumbered slave states, 17 to 15. By 1861 the number of free states had climbed to 19 while slave states remained at 15. This imbalance (and the belief of the southern states that slavery was a system that would not survive in a union where the number of slave states would not grow on a par with that of free states) engendered the United States Civil War (McPherson, 2010).

This is pertinent to this discussion as in the slave states most of the people who were identified in various registers as cooks or chefs were enslaved people of colour. This is very different than the situation as it pertained in the north where cooks were either fully free or indentured for a certain period in exchange for the expenses of their passage. Indentured servitude was not outlawed in the United States until 1917, although the practice was largely confined to Asians coming to the western United States after the civil war. (Decline of Indentured Servitude, N.D.).

It would appear that enslaved cooks and others that were assigned duties in the owner’s house were members of a ‘privileged’ class of slaves. As Frederick Douglass notes in his memoir:

These servants constituted a sort of black aristocracy. The resembled the field hands in
nothing except their color [sic] [...] so that in dress, as well as in form and feature, in manner and in speech, in tastes and habits, the distance between these favoured few and the sorrow and hunger-smitten multitudes of the quarter and the field were immense.

Slaves who had solid cooking skills fetched a premium in the slave markets (Twitty, 2017). Determining the ‘average’ price of a slave at any given point in history is a notoriously tricky business. Price depended to a large extent on supply, economic conditions, gender, age, physical condition, work history, perceived temperament, where the transaction occurred, and a multitude of other variables. Williamson and Cain (2018), estimate that slaves marketed as cooks brought a premium of at least 20% over the average price in a prevailing market. Slaves who could produce gourmet French-style food could attract an even higher premium.

Two of the most famous chefs of the Colonial era in the United States were male slaves, Hercules (no known surname) and James Hemmings, owned by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, respectively.

Hercules was a house slave owned by George Washington, the first president of the United States. Washington’s grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, wrote that Hercules was a ‘celebrated artiste’ who was ‘as highly accomplished and (?) proficient in the culinary arts as could be found in the United States’ (Gehred, 2016). Washington brought Hercules to Philadelphia on moving there to assume the presidency. Hercules was allowed to sell the slops (the leftovers, spent tea leaves, tallow from cooking, etc) from the kitchen giving him an income of $200–300, a year, a good salary in the period, and an unusual perquisite for a slave (LaBan, 2010).

Hercules rotated between the President’s house in Philadelphia and the President’s plantation, Mt. Vernon, in northern Virginia, this rotation taking place in order to avoid application of a law in the free state of Pennsylvania that made slaves free if they could establish a six-month residency in that state. This rotation was itself a violation of Pennsylvania law, a fact that Washington was well aware of. In correspondence with his secretary Tobias Lear, Washington noted: “I wish to have it accomplished under pretext that may deceive them both them and the Public”. Lear objected to the tactic, urging Washington to free Hercules and other slaves subjected to the same practice. However, it appears that the already legendary general and first president was not formally challenged by his advisors (Gehred, 2016).

While it was provided for that all of Washington’s slaves were to be freed upon his wife’s death Hercules, having tasted extensive freedom during his time in the North, escaped during a stay at Mt. Vernon on February 22, 1797 (LaBan, 2010). He was thought to be in hiding in Philadelphia for several years and was last sighted in New York City. By that time he was legally a free man due to the terms of manumission in Martha Washington’s will.

James Hemmings was a slave owned by the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, although it should be noted that Hemmings had been given his freedom prior to Jefferson assuming the presidency. Hemmings had trained briefly with a French chef, Honoré Julian, in Annapolis, Maryland and in Washington D.C., (Founders Online, N.D.). When Jefferson served as ambassador to France for the fledgling Republic, he brought Hemmings with him so that he could study French cooking and be apprenticed to skilled pastry chefs and other specialists. When Jefferson returned to his plantation at Monticello, Hemmings, despite the fact that he could have claimed his freedom based on the residency rule, negotiated an agreement with Jefferson allowing him to be manumitted after teaching the cooks on the plantation what he had learned during his time in France. Jefferson honoured the agreement and Hemmings was made a free man in 1796 (Founders Online, N.D. – Agreement). Hemmings worked in various places after his release from slavery, even returning briefly to Monticello. He was working as a chef in a tavern in Baltimore in 1801 when he committed suicide at the age of 36 (Gannon, 2018).

Hemmings’ time in France learning to be a chef is well documented, and according to Michael Twitty, this habit of sending men to Europe was not an uncommon practice in the south, especially around New Orleans. White residents of New Orleans wanted Creole cooks to be well versed in what they called ‘the French Way’ and frequently either sent men to France to learn the cuisine or, as was more often the case, had a French chef come to teach the locals.

It is noteworthy that these two enslaved chefs supervised free whites in their role as chef in the kitchen of the American President. Had they not been at the apex of their profession and employed by someone of presidential status, this situation would have never occurred in the young, rigidly segregated, slave-owning nation. While there is no record of the two men ever actually meeting, they were both in Philadelphia in 1797 where the black population at the time numbered only 210. They were each no doubt at least aware of the existence of the other.

The Young Republic

By the end of the eighteenth century it was becoming common for fashionable gentlemen to dine out at taverns that had a reputation for providing high quality viands. The first freestanding restaurant in the United States (one not associated with a tavern, hotel or other business) was Julien’s Restorator which opened in Boston in 1794 (Shields, 2017). Modeled on the French restorative model, the owner, Jean Baptiste Gilbert Payplat, was known as the ‘Prince of Soups’, making soups and other restoratives from his own recipes and those of Brillat-Savarin. Businesses using the restorator or restaurant name sprang up along the Atlantic coast from South Carolina to Maine.

During the late eighteenth-century coffee and chocolate houses had opened up in the larger American cities, attracting a more genteel clientele than that of the tavern or
the inn, establishments still considered somewhat coarse and unsuitable for respectable women. Notably, chocolate houses attracted unacquainted female customers (something not common previously), paving the way for females to eat in public at better quality restaurants and hotels (Freedman, 2014). As the balance of the clientele changed to include both more women and more middle-class diners, the importance of the quality of the food was heightened, with the result that more attention was focused on obtaining the best personnel for the ‘back of house’ along with advertising the fact that the business employed an impressive chef, European if possible.

Gauging the situation regarding improved dining out in America, two Swiss brothers, John (Giovanni) and Peter (Pietro) Delmonico, opened a small pastry shop in New York City in 1827. By 1837 they had moved to William Street in lower Manhattan and had become ‘the’ place to eat in America. Famous early guests included Charles Dickens and Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte. By the 1850s, fine dining was well established in every major city in the United States. Having a reputable chef was part of the formula of success. Delmonico’s Head Chef was Charles Ranhofer, who served for just short of forty years and was paid $6000 per annum [over €100,000 today] (Thomas, 1967). The Parker House Hotel in Boston, famous for their Parker House rolls and Boston Cream Pie, hired the first celebrity French chef in America, M. Sanzian, who earned a salary of $5000 per year, about ten times the average earnings of an American chef at the time (Moore, 2013).

One of the few paths to affluence and respect open to free black men in America prior to the Civil War was the catering business. In some cities, for example Philadelphia, Negro caterers, as they were then known, became significant players in foodservice. Writing about the two decades before the American Civil War, where opportunities for blacks were paltry and race prejudice often turned violent, W.E.B. DuBois stated:

The outlook for the Negro in Philadelphia in 1840 was not encouraging. [...] It was at this time that there arose to prominence and power as remarkable a trade guild as ever ruled in a mediaeval city. It took complete leadership of the bewildered group of Negroes, and led them steadily on to a degree of affluence, culture and respect such as has probably never been surpassed in the history of the Negro in America. This was the guild of the caterers, and its masters include names which have been household words in the city for fifty years: Bogle, Augustin, Prosser, Dorsey, Jones and Minton. (DuBois & Eaton, 1899 p. 32).

Post-Civil War America

The Civil War was the great cataclysm of American history. The country, which had up to that time been politically and economically dominated by the agrarian, rural, slave-owning Southern plantation aristocracy, was suddenly changed into a nation where ideals of free-labour entrepreneurial capitalism held sway. Once the era of Reconstruction ended in the 1870s, the American industrial dynamo hit full stride, creating real economic gains for many working Americans and vast wealth for the tycoons of the era. Dubbed the ‘Gilded Age’ by Mark Twain, a reference to the thin veneer of wealth overlying massive social inequality, it was an era of remarkable conspicuous consumption on the part of the wealthy. Housing, clothing, and transport vehicles were all created display the enormous wealth of the era’s tycoons. Food was no different. The wealthy strove to entertain in the most ostentatious fashion and eat at the most expensive restaurants of the day. Delmonico’s of New York still drew the rich and famous, but there was much competition both for and between customers in New York. In one of the most flamboyant displays of excess, the millionaire C.K.G. Billings took over the entire Sherry’s Restaurant (the city’s most expensive) and had a dinner for 36 of his closest male friends, all seated on horseback. The bill amounted to $50,000 American (just under €1 million at this writing) (Crain, 2016).

The custom of employing and showing off chefs from Europe, especially French chefs, ramped up even further during the Gilded Age. European chefs were paid exorbitant sums and marketing for the restaurants employing them began to feature chefs in earnest. In 1894, Charles Ranhofer of Delmonico’s published what is considered to be the first modern era celebrity chef cookbook, *The Epicurean*. The book is notable in several ways, not least of which is its attention to American regional ingredients, especially those of New England and the mid-Atlantic states. *The Epicurean* has informed and inspired American cookery through to the present time. Beard, Renggli, and Tower, all renowned chefs, openly acknowledge the influence of the book on their approach to cuisine. David Shields (2017) asserts that *The Epicurean* is: ‘substantially more useful than Escoffier’s (Le Guide Culinaire)’ to today’s cooks.

The Early Twentieth Century

Between the end of the Gilded Age and the end of World War One, which coincided with the beginning of Prohibition, dining in America became less opulent and more austere, partly as a reaction to the excesses of the Gilded Age and partly due to changing social customs associated with a rapidly changing workplace. Overall wages grew and women entered the workforce in increasing numbers. While the share of money spent dining outside the home increased, it practice it was spent in places with more limited menus and more casual service styles, a habit which dealt a blow to the providers of expensive dining.

Both cafeterias and automats (a slot operated cafeteria) became widespread during the first decade of the twentieth
century in America. America looked inward in this period, and ‘foreign’ dining fell out of favour (Jakle & Sculle, 1999). Prohibition and the Depression dealt a further blow to fine dining and the upward social progression of chefs. Restaurants often depended on the sale of wine and spirits to prop up the bottom line. Lack of revenue from these sources resulted in the closure of icons like Delmonico’s and Sherry’s with many fine hotels barely surviving the various blows dealt them in the period.

The Late 1930s and the Resurgence of Foreign Food

While there was no doubt a great deal of pent-up demand after thirty years of relative austerity, one of the culinary experiences that made the greatest impressions on culinary-minded, mid-century Americans was dining at Le Restaurant du Pavilion de France, the restaurant in the French pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City. French chefs selling food with French names had been commonplace in fine dining circles since the end of the American Revolution, but the cuisine had always been modified to suit American expectations. This was not the case in this instance and Americans responded enthusiastically. An assistant poissonier, by the name of Pierre Franey accompanied maître d’hotel Henri Soule from Paris to New York to work at the fair. After the fair, Franey became the chef at Le Pavilion, the Manhattan restaurant started by Soule. Franey then went on to become a star chef, writing for The New York Times with Craig Clairborne, starring in cooking shows on American public television, and consulting for the famous orange-roof chain Howard Johnson’s (Freedman, 2016).

America’s entry into the Second World War at the end of 1941 slowed down the progress of the growth in stature of the chef but did not end it. Rationing of food was widespread in the United States during the war, but restaurants were among the most lightly controlled. Restaurants often managed to obtain supplies of the best meats and vegetables and as so many people were working long hours in the war industry, foodservice outlets were both popular and well-patronized. A good cook could still make a comfortable living.

The twentieth century saw a perfect storm of events that created the launching pad for the chef to become a star player on the American stage. The modern food culture in America grew out of four mid-twentieth century occurrences that happened in a rapid enough sequence to have a lasting impact on American palates and behaviours. The first of these was the end of Prohibition. Food and wine had taken a back seat to speakeasies and cocktails during the 1920s in America. While many speakeasies hid behind the façade of the foodservice establishment, the real draw was the liquor. After Prohibition ended, food and wine service normalized thereby opening up more opportunities for chefs. Added to this was the significant increase in wealth that occurred as America left the Great Depression behind.

The employment created by a vast armament industry in America that supported a two front World War contributed to a rising economy. Added to this was the return of millions of soldiers who had fought in Europe and Asia and who came back with a taste for the food and beverages that they had been exposed to on their tours of duty. The final significant factor was the emergence of a significant middle class in mid-century with monetary resources at their disposal and enough leisure time to spend it on the purchase of dining experiences (Miller & Deutsch, 2016).

The Late Twentieth Century

To capitalize on this interest in food and dining, American media began to feature cooks and food in novel ways. Gourmet Magazine began its seventy-year run in 1941 with colourful coverage mirroring America’s new interest in good food. Clementine Paddleford’s column in the New York Herald Tribune was syndicated nationally, raising the profile of American cookery in the post-war era. While commentary on restaurants and the food they served had been sporadically available in newspapers from as early as the 1850s, by the 1960s every leading newspaper and many magazines had restaurant criticism as a regular feature. A good review could elevate a chef to stardom and a bad review could send a chef to purgatory — at least for a while. Print media was incredibly powerful in its ability to make or break an establishment through its reviews. However, television, which came into its own as a medium post World War Two, could make chefs powerful stars in their own right, regardless of the restaurant that they were nominally overseeing. At the end of the war there were about 50,000 television sets in use in the Boston-Washington Corridor, enough to justify four television networks. By 1960 there were 50 million sets in use in the United States (Library of Congress, N.D.)

The first national cooking show in America was I Love to Eat featuring James Beard, then a caterer in New York City. He parlayed his early television fame into a prominent career writing cookbooks and teaching culinary arts at the James Beard Cooking School. Chef Dione Lucas was the first female graduate of Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, subsequently opening a branch of the school in New York City. In 1947 she became the first female chef in America to have her own television show, “To the Queen’s Taste”. A feature of the show was having celebrity guests, one of whom was Salvador Dali, who brought his dogs on set. While both of these early television personalities were well regarded in the culinary community prior to being broadcast personalities, their exposure, limited as it was in this era of television, increased both their own stature and that of other chefs (Collins, 2010).

Arguably the first superstar chef of American television was Julia Child. While best remembered for her series The French Chef on American public television, which ran from 1963 to 1973, she also had a number of other
television shows over a broadcasting career that lasted until the end of the twentieth century. Influential in both the home and professional cooking arenas, she used her bully pulpit to ‘coax Americans into a culinary evolution ... (and) put America on a steady course to culinary maturity’ (Bell, 2010). Child demystified French cuisine for Americans and in doing so, refashioned viewers into diners eager for a sophisticated consumption experience. On-camera her persona was neither starchy nor stiff, talking directly to the viewer and taking mistakes and flops in her stride. It is difficult to conceive of the ‘goofy shtick’ of Emeril Lagasse or Anthony Bourdain without the relaxed presentation style perfected by Child on “The French Chef”. Child parlayed a local cookery show into a small empire of television style perfected by Child on “The French Chef”. Child parlayed a local cookery show into a small empire of television shows, cookbooks, and personal appearances creating the mold for a generation of chefs who would follow.

While Julia Child was introducing Americans to the cuisine bourgeois of France, nouvelle cuisine was laying siege to the traditional grande cuisine of France. Child was not a fan of the new cookery, but it piqued American curiosity and took the culinary world by storm. Much of what was dubbed ‘the New American Cuisine’ had its roots in nouvelle cuisine – inventive use of unusual ingredients, new techniques, artful plating, fusion flavours, etc. Waters, Tower, Trotter, and Waxman, the first of the modern generation of American chefs, all used this new cuisine as a starting place for the dishes they wished to create, and in the process, Americans were galvanized (Myhrvold, 2015).

Nouvelle cuisine was not without its critics, the extreme minimalism of some dishes making it a target of jokes, jests, and japes. P.T. Barnum is credited with saying that ‘there is no bad publicity.’ While television host Johnny Carson may have made fun of Los Angeles outposts of nouvelle cuisine like Ma Maison or l’Orangerie or Spago, customers came in their droves. Culinary connoisseurship became highly fashionable. Knowing about ‘fancy’ dishes, expensive wine, and culinary personalities became important cultural capital.

Both the increasing profile of the chef as celebrity and lobbying by the American Culinary Federation, led by Chef Louis Szathmary, led to the upgrading of the occupational status of chefs from domestic to professional by the United States Department of Labor in 1977.

The Food TV Era

The Food Television Network, or Food TV as it is more colloquially known, made its debut in America on November 22, 1993. The original line-up of shows was more lifestyle oriented than chef-driven. Emeril Lagasse and Jacque Pepin were the only ‘big name’ chefs involved and most airtime was given to shows hosted by ‘celebrities’ such as Debbie Fields (of Mrs. Fields Cookies fame), Donna Hanover (wife of then New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani), and Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous host, Robin Leach. The network made the switch to chef-driven content relatively quickly in an attempt to boost ratings (Salkin, 2014). Mario Batali and Bobby Flay joined the line-up and “Emeril Live” with its famous taglines of ‘Let’s kick it up a notch!’ and ‘BAM!’ made high-profile, lively, chef-driven content the driver of the network. At its height, Food Network was seen in 100 million U.S. households and was the number nine network overall in terms of rating share. While these numbers have declined somewhat in recent years, it is still widely watched with shows such as “Chopped” and “Iron Chef” still creating ‘buzz’ and wielding influence (Gagliaridi, 2014).

Today, the chef is one of the most influential personalities on the American landscape. ‘Chef’ as a search term averages about 90 million hits a day on Google. Chefs are the subjects of motion pictures, of adoring profiles in magazines, and have cult followings on the internet. Cookbooks by chefs continue to be one of the bright spots of the book publishing industry. Taking into account both public and private schools, high schools, tech centres, and colleges, there are approaching 500 culinary programs graduating chefs in the United States.

The chef has made a remarkable rise through the social classes in the United States, from being slaves and domestic servants, quite possibly the lowest rungs on the ladder of status, to being admired professionals, and approaching rock star status in the accolades they acquire and the groupies that follow them. Television shows follow their search for and production of the latest dish. Their recipes are some of the most searched items on the internet. Home kitchens are now designed to resemble the kitchens of the star chefs. The transformation is remarkable.

About the author

Jeffrey P. Miller has twenty years experience in the food-service industry and is currently associate professor and program director for the Hospitality Management program at Colorado State University. Dr Miller received his formal culinary training at New England Culinary Institute and holds a Master’s Degree from Kansas State University in Hotel, Restaurant and Institution Management and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Colorado State University.

Prior to teaching at Colorado State University, Dr Miller was the program director for Culinary Arts and Food Service Management at Utah State University. At Colorado State University he was awarded the CSU Alumni Association Best Teacher Award in 2007. In 2017, he was named as the CAFE/Sysco Culinary Educator of the Year. Since becoming a teacher, he has done research in teaching methods, sustainability in the hospitality industry, alcohol beverage management, food and culture, and heritage/culinary tourism.

Works cited
