

# Travel the World without Leaving Your Kitchen

## International Cooking Series

### Celebrating Culture through Food

Every person in the United States is unique based on their past experiences, histories, and traditions. While their language, clothing, religion, sexual orientation, and/or ethnicity may be very different from your own, finding out and learning about another culture helps us respect each other's values. Only then can we begin to enjoy interactions with others to find joy in cultural diversity. Understanding cultural food choices helps us appreciate the rich diversity of culinary practices worldwide. Each person's culture and customs involve many dietary practices, including traditional recipes and food choices, preparation and cooking techniques, and mealtime rituals, often passed down through generations. Traditional restaurants play a role in preserving cultural heritage by promoting traditional dishes and ingredients. So, you don't have to travel halfway around the world to explore food as culture. Let's explore how we can foster our own traditional food practices while discovering new cuisines.



### Cultural Sensitivity

There are so many food ingredients and cuisines to try and so little time to try them all! There are many traditions around the dinner table, including specific national dishes and celebratory meals. To understand people from different backgrounds, you must be willing to be culturally sensitive. This simply means you are open to exploring the food

culture of someone or somewhere different. This helps us to gain a deeper appreciation of the role food plays in developing our own cultural identities. Experiencing new recipes allows our own cultural identities to expand. The following examples are just a few countries that have greatly influenced our American food scene. Can you think of recipes from other countries you would like to try?

# Italy

Italy has long been known for creating food experiences based on their culinary heritage. Part of their tradition is to cook and dine together, enjoying fresh ingredients, and conversations with family and friends. Over time, Italians have adapted their old family recipes to fit the tastes of modern-day Americans, which has become a part of today's American food culture.

*Ragù*, in the traditional form, is a simple meat-based sauce that originated in Bologna, Italy. The base of a traditional *ragù* is *soffritto*, a vegetable mixture of onion, celery, and carrots. The other main ingredients are tomatoes, meats (beef, pork, or veal), cooking liquid (wine, milk, or broth), and herbs. The sauce then cooks for several hours to let the meat become soft and to let the flavors blend. Try making your own sauce to experience the true flavors of Italy.

## Ragù - Vegetarian Version

Yield: 4 servings

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 237 calories, 24 g fat, 10 mg cholesterol, 197 mg sodium, 2 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein

### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ribs of celery, diced
- 2 large carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 small onions, diced
- 2 pounds fresh tomatoes, peeled, deseeded, and crushed OR 1 28-ounce can of crushed tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon dried basil
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 cup vegetable broth
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper



**Note:** To substitute fresh herbs for dried, use three times the quantity called for in this recipe.

### Instructions

1. In a large saucepan, over medium heat, add the oil and heat until shimmering.
2. Add the *soffritto* (onion, celery, and carrots). Cook until slightly browned, about 10 minutes.
3. Add remaining ingredients, stirring to combine.
4. Reduce heat to low, cover with a lid, and simmer for about 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove bay leaf before service.
5. Serve chunky sauce over polenta or the traditional pappardelle pasta.

**Note:** For a smoother, thinner sauce, blend with a stick blender. For a thicker sauce, remove the lid and simmer until reduced slightly. Or add 1 tablespoon of tomato paste or 2 tablespoons of tomato puree at the end and cook until you have the desired consistency.



## Japan

Japan's cultural identity is greatly influenced by its food traditions and food ingredients. Traditional dishes like sushi, tempura, and ramen are considered an art form and have become very popular in the United States. In 2013, Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, was designated an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. (This simply means that the traditional Washoku practice is considered a part of Japan's cultural heritage.) *Washoku* balances flavors, colors, and texture, and incorporates the five basic flavors of sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami. The use of fresh, seasonal ingredients is essential in maintaining the proper quality.

Soba are noodles made from buckwheat flour. There are many types and brands of noodles. Or you can even make your own. Look for thicker noodles as they maintain their shape. On New Year's Eve, slurping the thin noodles (the customary way to eat the dish), is meant to symbolize longevity. You can add various broths and other ingredients to experience different flavor profiles.

## Soba

Yield: 4 servings

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 15 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving:* 280 calories, 0.5 g fat, 540 mg sodium, 54 g carbohydrates, 14 g protein

### Ingredients

- 1 8-ounce package soba (noodles)
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 8 ounces shiitake, oyster, or cremini mushrooms, sliced
- 2 cups bok choy, sliced crosswise
- ½ cup shredded carrots, peeled
- 1 scallion, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons low-sodium soy or tamari sauce
- 2 tablespoons mirin OR white rice wine



### Instructions

1. Cook the soba according to package directions. This will involve a large saucepan over high heat and boiling water for around 5 minutes. Drain noodles and rinse with cold water.
2. In a large saucepan, over medium heat, add the oil and heat until shimmering. Add the mushrooms and bok choy and sauté for around 8 minutes.
3. Add remaining ingredients, stirring to combine.

**Note:** To make it a meal, add a fried egg, pan-fried tofu, or tempura shrimp. Store in the refrigerator for up to three days. Serve cold or hot. Add 3 cups of broth for a delicious soba soup. The web is full of Japanese broth recipes to try, or you can buy them.



## Mexico

The indigenous communities of Mexico infused their dishes with a blend of flavors, using aromatic herbs, spices, and vanilla. From tomatoes and beans to corn and chili peppers, they have become American staples. But Mexican food is a mosaic of regional culinary traditions. In 2010, UNESCO recognized Mexican gastronomy as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. Contemporary food trends found immigrants combining flavors and American cooking to create Tex-Mex. This is an example of a distinctive cuisine that honors a Mexican American heritage that has changed the landscape of American cultural identities.

Jicama is a root or tuber native to Mexico. Traditionally, you eat it raw after peeling and slicing it into strips. Add some lime juice and chili powder and you have a nice snack to munch on a hot day. It is especially delicious with grilled fish and roasted pork, or add thin slices to sandwiches to add crunch. Try this salad for a refreshing change from coleslaw.

## Jicama Salad

Yield: 9 servings

Prep time: 30 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per ½-cup serving:* 80 calories, 1 g fat, 75 mg sodium, 6 g carbohydrate

### Ingredients

- ½ cup red bell pepper, julienned
- ½ cup green bell pepper, julienned
- ½ cup yellow bell pepper, julienned
- ½ cup peeled carrots, julienned
- ½ cup peeled and deseeded cucumbers, julienned
- 2 cups peeled jicama, julienned
- 1 tablespoon fresh cilantro, minced
- 1 teaspoon fresh parsley, minced
- 1 teaspoon fresh chives, minced
- ¼ cup shallots, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2 tablespoons vinegar white, red, or apple cider
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon black pepper

### Instructions

1. In a medium bowl, add all ingredients and mix until thoroughly combined. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

**Note:** Jicama absorbs flavors well. Instead of the above oil and vinegar dressing, use your favorite vinaigrette or salad dressings. Store in the refrigerator for up to three days.

# Food Bridges Cultural Divides

Food has the power to bring people together, especially during times of celebrations, such as birthdays, weddings, and holidays. The preparation and sharing of food are both a social and sensory experience. It allows us to savor diverse flavors while immersing ourselves in the history, traditions, and values of a particular culture. Food also gives us something to talk about. Most of us can passionately describe a delicious recipe or meal that someone in our family has passed down for generations and the ensuing joy of sharing the dish around the table. Exploring, learning, and embracing cultural food traditions, both our own and others', can broaden our perspectives about history and cultures from around the world. Even grandma's chicken and dumplings or your uncle's annual fish fry can be an opportunity to learn about your family's history and the foods that were important on their dinner table. Whether you experience these cultural differences in eating while traveling, while visiting a restaurant in your community, or by preparing them at home, it can help you celebrate the cultural diversity found in all our communities. Let's travel the world without leaving our kitchen to gain a deeper appreciation of the role food plays in developing our own cultural identities.

## References

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