

Are food tastes evolving or cyclical?

By Jennie Yabroff, Newsweek

A writer declares in the *New York Times* that Americans eat far too many animal products; he advises that if we do as the French do and limit our intake of meat, we will be healthier and spend less money on food. Michael Pollan, in this month's food issue of the *Times* magazine? No, a reader with the initials A.B.C., writing to the paper—in 1856. Instead of bacon and eggs, A.B.C. suggests Americans begin their mornings with café au lait, defined as a “decoction” of coffee with boiled milk—still a popular breakfast choice, as the lines at any Starbucks will attest.

Food writing is almost always infused with nostalgia. But when it comes to food trends, we have a recurring case of cultural amnesia. The Food Network, molecular gastronomy, vegans, locavores, heritage chickens, the obesity tax: it's easy to assume that our current obsession with food is unprecedented. Surely our palates are more sophisticated, our recipes more complex, and our ideas about health and nutrition more enlightened than ever. In fact, most of our current obsessions are as old as Spanish cream. Never tasted it? It was all the rage in 1878, and, after reinterpretations as Bavarian cream, pot de crème, and crème brûlée, was featured on the Food Network's Everyday Italian in its current faddish, egg-free incarnation, panna cotta, last May.

The Essential New York Times Cookbook, a nearly 1,000-page, bright-red doorstop (ideal for pressing terrines, says the book's editor, Amanda Hesser), proves that when it comes to what we eat, there's no such thing as invention, merely reinterpretation. In compiling the book, the first compendium of *Times* recipes since Craig Claiborne's 1961 version, Hesser

solicited suggestions from readers, ransacked the Times's archives, and tested recipes spanning 150 years, throwing out any she wouldn't make again. She found that not only have our tastes changed less than we think they have, but food has always been a key indicator of who we think we are—and who we aspire to be.

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