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Tracing the Rise of Food Mash-ups

By Jennifer Mennella

As the Carolina Panthers and Denver Broncos set out to play in the 50th Super Bowl on February 7, 2016 the Mexican-style fast-food proprietor Taco Bell was getting ready to run a play of its own. This was the day that Taco Bell would begin promotion of its newest creation to the roughly 112 million people who would tune in to the sporting spectacle. The amount of strategy behind this campaign was as tricky and intricate as has ever been dreamed up by any football coach.

Pegged as Taco Bell’s “biggest launch to date,” fans were able to pre-order the company’s newest item and try it two days before the initial release. The catch? They didn’t actually know what they were getting until that day. The item — the Quesalupa — was officially revealed to the world in a 30-second ad during America’s leading sporting event.

This new creation wasn’t your typical taco, or a new breakfast menu item. It was a combination of a quesadilla, a tortilla filled with cheese, and a Chalupa, a dish served up by the eatery that takes a deep-fried, flat-bread like shell and stuffs it with ground beef, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes and sour cream. The Quesalupa takes the filling of a Chalupa and pairs it with a quesadilla shell that’s stuffed with pepper jack cheese and is deep-fried. The result: a 600-calorie finger food with a crispy exterior that oozes melted cheese.

In traditional Taco Bell fashion the item was designed to make a splash, and it did. The online food publication, Eater wrote about the $5 million price tag the restaurant chain paid to promote the Quesalupa; US Weekly did an explainer about it delving into what it’s made of; and Thrillist reviewed it declaring it “as tasty as it is unsurprising,” while Buzzfeed said it tasted “like the familiar Chalupa.” Not to mention the hashtag that was generated following the announcement—#Quesalupa is still used today, although the item has since been discontinued due to its limited-time release.

In the culinary-coverage world, the strange combination Taco Bell came up with is known by the term “food mash-up.” “A food mash-up is any dish where you self-consciously combine two dishes that wouldn’t normally be seen in the same bite,” says Bret Thorn, Senior Food and Beverage Editor at Nation’s Restaurant News.

The birth and death of the Quesalupa is just one mash-up that made its way onto menus in 2016. In September, Burger King announced its Cheetos Chicken Fries, which take the fast-food restaurant’s Chicken Fries (deep-friend chicken fingers in the shape of French fries), and coats them with Cheetos flavored breading. But many mash-ups are local phenomena, popping up in established foodie cities like New York and Los Angeles. Shops like Pokiritto, Uma Temakeria and Sushirrito have opened in New York City selling the so-called “sushi burrito,” which substitutes nori for a tortilla and fills it with sushi rice, fish like raw tuna and salmon, cucumbers, carrots, sesame seeds, tempura crunch, and tobajian mayo, also known as spicy mayo. In addition, Burgrito, a restaurant dedicated to combining burgers and burritos, is making its way to Brooklyn.

So what’s making this trend so hot? “It has to do with a sense of culinary adventurism that started in the past ten years driven by America’s growing interest in food,” says Thorn. He adds that the growth of social media allows people to “express their food interests and experiences more publicly.”

While we’ve seen an influx of mash-ups in the culinary world in recent years, this isn’t necessarily new.

“I think that this idea of a mash-up as something new makes us think we’re very impressed with what we’re doing now,” says Cathy Kaufman of the New York Culinary Historians. “But I think it’s been going on under different labels for literally thousands of years.”
She cites spaghetti and meatballs as an example of a historic mash-up, one that wasn’t made as a marketing stunt, but out of necessity using ingredients that were readily available in America with influences from Southern Italy.

Italians began immigrating to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, and meatballs, or polpette in Italian, existed in Italy, but it wasn’t until they began to cross the Atlantic that they paired polpette with spaghetti.

“That is not an Italian dish; it is quote mash-up of an Italian dish and an American food tradition of having quite a bit of meat in the diet,” says Kaufman.

Another historic mash-up she mentions: the hamburger.

The inventor of the hamburger is up for debate. But before there was Shake Shack, there were sandwiches, which according to the book *Hamburger A Global History* by Andrew F. Smith, began to appear in English cookbooks in the late 18th century. In delving into the origins of the hamburger, Smith also looks at the history of the Salisbury steak — more popularly known at the time as the Hamburg steak. Prior to grilling beef patties, ground beef was served raw, says Smith. He describes how James H. Salisbury, a New York Physician, discouraged people from eating raw beef because of health concerns, and suggested it be formed into patties and grilled. The “burger” that Americans know and love, is really a mash-up of a sandwich and a Hamburg steak.
Dishes like spaghetti and meatballs and the hamburger we made out of necessity or convenience, but mash-ups were also a way to introduce Americans to cuisines that they may not have otherwise been familiar with.

It’s hard today to think of a time when #TacoTuesday wasn’t a weekly festivity and Mexican food was considered foreign. The Bell Burger, which was around in the mid-1960s to 70’s, was made of taco meat, shredded cheese and mild border sauce—the tamest of Taco Bell’s three hot sauce varieties which in addition to mild come in hot and fire and is made with ingredients like tomato paste and chili pepper—served between two buns somewhat reminiscent of a Sloppy Joe. Unlike spaghetti and meatballs and the hamburger, a fast-food company created the Bell Burger, not home chefs.

“The Bell Burger was most definitely a Mexican-inspired take on a burger,” says a Taco Bell spokesperson via email. “And was relevant at its time because customers were very familiar with burger and hot dog stands, but were still getting use to the concept of tacos.”

Blatant mash-up attempts like these were sporadic until the emergence of so-called fusion cooking.

The West Coast was a hotspot for this type of cuisine and chefs like Wolfgang Puck helped to “accelerate” the trend, says Gary Allen, a food writer and Food History Editor at Leite’s Culinaria, a website that has won two James Beard Awards.

Puck’s first restaurant Spago opened in West Hollywood in 1982 and featured items like raw tuna on a menu with American and European dishes. And, while the trend may have started as early as the 70’s, fusion became a culinary buzzword in the 90’s. David Leite, the founder of Leite’s Culinaria, talks about this in a 1999 blog post titled, “Dining Through the Decades: 100 Years of American Food.” Leite describes how between 1990 and 1999 as foreign cuisines like Mediterranean, Northern Italian and Pacific Rim became more available, chefs began merging different gastronomies, which became known as fusion cooking.

Then, in the early twenty-tens, there was another perfect storm that escalated interest in food mash-ups. Instagram, the social media site dedicated to photo sharing, launched in 2010 and suddenly anyone with a smart phone could double as a food photographer. The hashtag #foodporn became a popular way for “foodies” to mark their culinary experiences, and to date over 106 million posts currently use the hashtag. Then in 2013, the Cronut, Dominique Ansel’s doughnut-croissant hybrid, was launched. The Cronut met Instagram and a social media star was born.

The Cronut sent shockwaves through the New York City culinary scene and food culture across the globe. People waited hours in a line that stretched blocks from the bakery’s home on Spring Street in Soho to get their hands on one of the $5.00 pastries (the price is now $5.75). For those that couldn’t wait, they were able to purchase their Cronuts on the black market for an inflated price of up to $40.

The demand for Cronuts is still so high that weekly preorders starting on Monday at 11:00 AM on cronutpreorder.com can sell out within minutes, according to a disclaimer on the website that reads, “because of the high demand and small inventory, it is easy for a day to sell out between the time you load the page and by the time you press ‘Buy Now’.”

Cronutpreorder.com allows customers to purchase their pastries—there’s a limit of six per preorder—two weeks in advance of the date they’ll pick it up at the shop. And if you really can’t wait in line, you can hire someone from Same Ole Line Dudes, a company that has people wait in line for you, to get your Cronut. For a cost of course: it charges $25 for the first hour of waiting and then $10 each additional 30 minutes (with a two-hour minimum).
Dominque Ansel Bakery began selling the pastry on Friday, May 10th, 2013, and in an article for American Express Open Forum, he explains that the Cronut went viral overnight. “When I woke up on Saturday, there were 140,000 links to photos of the Cronut all over the Internet and we had a line around the block before we even opened,” he says in the story. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Ansel is a James Beard Award-winning French pastry chef. Prior to opening his own bakery he worked as the executive pastry chef at Daniel Boulud’s Upper East Side restaurant—Daniel. On his website, it says it took him over 10 recipes and two months to create the Cronut. The dough is laminated, meaning that it consists of many thin layers like that of a croissant. It is fried in grapeseed oil, then rolled in sugar, filled with cream, and topped with the glaze of the month (the Cronut flavor changes monthly)—Ansel’s website states that this is a three-day process. The bakery limits daily Cronut output to around 350 per day, according to Condé Nast Traveler.

Just a few months after the Cronut craze, the Ramen Burger debuted at Smorgasburg, an outdoor food market in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It was the brainchild of Keizo Shimamoto, a Japanese-American chef who grew up in LA and moved to Japan to study the art of ramen. It was there that he came across pork sandwiches with ramen buns. After leaving Japan he returned to the states but this time headed East to New York where the opportunity to have a booth at Smorgasburg presented itself. From there, he crafted the Ramen Burger—a beef burger with two buns made of ramen noodles topped with arugula, scallions, and shoyu sauce—an Americanized variation of the pork burgers he found in Japan.
Shimamoto documented the process behind crafting the sandwich on his blog, GO RAMEN, prior to the burger’s August 3rd release. In a blog post from that day, he recounts the burger’s success saying, “I can’t believe how fast news can travel. In just two days, the Ramen Burger went from dream to internet superstar before I even sold a single one.” That same day he says he appeared on Good Morning America and sold out of all 150 Ramen Burgers he had prepared for Smorgasburg.

After the success of the Cronut and the Ramen Burger, mash-up mania ensued. Round-ups of “crazy” food mash-ups and “mash-ups that’ll blow your mind” circulated online; First We Feast dedicated a weekly column to the subject titled, “Ridiculous Mashup Foods of the Week”; and entrepreneurs started capitalizing on the enthusiasm with mash-ups of their own.

“When I think of mash-ups I think of it as a phenomenon in itself,” say Ryan Sutton, Editor of the food news site Eater. “But I also think of it as a larger phenomenon that belongs to kind of the, for lack of a better term, viral food trends.”

And viral they are: #cronut has been used over 100,000 times on Instagram and #ramenburger has been used almost 50,000 times. While Sutton considers these items the “modern start of mash-ups,” he believes that Black Tap Milkshakes—large shakes topped with items like cookies, brownies, and cotton candy available at Black Tap Burgers & Beer in New York—to be on par with their viral success. These, like the Cronut and Ramen Burger, caused a stir in the culinary world and long lines ensued.

While mash-ups are wildly popular, not everyone is fond of them. In a 2016 Zagat poll that surveyed nearly 10,000 America diners, 38% of the people surveyed said they were “over” food mash-ups.

Despite those customer misgivings, restaurants are still incorporating them into their menus and they are still going strong. Technomic, a foodservice industry research and consulting firm, included the craze in a 2015 Flavor Consumer Trend Report predicting “the mashup trend will drive flavor innovation across entrees: pastas will feature pizza and burger flavors, and tacos will find Asian reinvention.”

Jill Failla, Editor of Consumer Insights at Technomic who writes the trends for the company’s Consumer Trend Report series, describes this as an “outlook trend.” Meaning she expects leading restaurants to implement the trend into their businesses within a few years.

“To choose these trends, I look at what consumers say they want and what independent operators are already starting to do,” says Failla. This is done by looking at independent restaurant menus as a way to forecast what will make its way to restaurant-chain menus. “For example, I see a lot of burnt flavor callouts on independent restaurant menus but not many burnt descriptors on chain menus,” she says. “As a result, we are likely to see more burnt flavors at the chain level in coming years.”

And there are plenty of local menus that are doing this. Marta, a Union Square Hospitality owned Italian restaurant in New York’s Flatiron District, serves carbonara pizza; EGP Gastropub, a local, Long Island eatery offers Philly cheesesteak eggrolls; and The Stanton Social, a Lower East Side establishment features French onion soup dumplings.

Nation’s Restaurant News’ Senior Food and Beverage Editor, Bret Thorn listed culinary mash-ups as one of the “hottest restaurant concepts setting trends around the country.” Examples he sites are the Calle Ocho bánh mi with ham, turkey, bacon, Swiss cheese and kimchi at Halves & Wholes in Miami, and the cheeseburger devilled eggs at Bookmakers Cocktail Club in Baltimore.

So what does the future have in store for mash-ups? Thorn says that he thinks the trend will come in waves. “There will be a little lull as one generation gets use to this stuff, and is not as impressed,” he says. But that doesn’t mean that we’re done with them just yet. “Although I can’t visualize what the next big mash-up will be, I’m sure we’ll see something that will make the Cronut look silly and cute…there will be some other thing that takes the world by storm.”