

A guide to a whole world of cuisines

By Douglas Brown
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On the surface, we are a nation of lo mein and gyros, of spaghetti and chicken burritos and supermarket sushi (and of course, hamburgers and hot dogs).

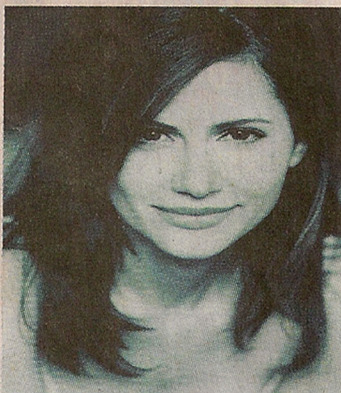
Given the state of the country's culinary landscape just a few decades ago (meat, potatoes), the evolution is welcome.

But peek beneath those plates of pad thai and bowls of miso soup, says author Danyelle Freeman, and you'll find the rest of the planet: a land of tsukune (Japanese chicken meatballs), brodetto di pesce (Italian fish stew) and chilaquiles verdes (tortilla strips sauteed with salsa and topped with fresh cheese)

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"You can find the world's food everywhere," said Freeman, the founder of the blog restaurantgirl.com and author of "Try This: Traveling the Globe Without Leaving the Table." "It's about eating from the other side of the menu."

Her book is a guide to those overlooked dishes — the ones the college-students from Tokyo order at the sushi place,



Author and blogger
Danyelle Freeman

when everybody else is inhaling California rolls — and a call to curious eaters around the country to seek the authentic and novel, to skip the soggy fish and chips in favor of kedgeree (an English staple: flaked haddock, hard-boiled egg, cream, rice, curry powder).

Freeman, who spends an inordinate amount of time eating at restaurants, said at least one thing ties together the world's best cuisines: simplicity.

"Cuisines boil down to five main ingredients, and suddenly they don't seem so intimidating at all," said the New York blogger. "If you think of Thai food, it's lime juice, chiles, peanuts, rice. You can look at every cuisine that way. They use five main ingredients."

She added: "Why have pad thai when you can have a bazillion other dishes that the Thai people have been eating for centuries?"

Freeman embraces haute cuisine, where entrees come

adorned with mackerel and aloe foams, and look like abstract paintings, and severely lighten wallets. But her career of restaurant-going, and working on the book, convinced her that the most satisfying dishes from around the world, often, are comfort foods.

What gives her comfort?

Yakitori, which for the most part is Japanese skewered and grilled chicken. It's Japanese pub food. She craves posole, a spicy Mexican soup, and a Korean soup spiked with ginseng called samgyetang. She craves Valencian paella and Provençal bouillabasse.

Freeman lives and eats in New York City, where nearly every micro-cuisine has its representative restaurants, if not neighborhoods. Other cities have their concentrations of authentic ethnic food — Houston's Vietnamese population thrives, Miami has Cuban and Haitian food — but New York has it all.

What does she think should become more widespread?

Shanghai soup dumplings, which are dumplings filled with soup (instead of soup dotted with dumplings).

"They are little miracles," she said.

She wishes more French restaurants around the country offered cassoulet (a bean stew with a lot of meat), and more Italian places prepared bolito misto (a boiled meat supper; Freeman says the description does not do the dish justice). She thinks people in towns and cities across the country would love Japanese izakaya, which are low-key drinking joints that serve wide varieties of small plates and snacks.

The countries of Asia are well-represented in the book, and she thinks they now commandeer a big part of the food zeitgeist. The Vietnamese banh mi, a spicy sandwich on

a French roll, has nearly become mainstream, and behind it are more obscure Vietnamese and Thai offerings, as well as dishes from nearby countries like Laos and Cambodia.

"A lot of East Asian cuisines haven't gotten their due," she said. "Yet."