

> CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Earthy interiors at DGS Delicatessen; pasta at Meadowland; fresh seafood; sandwich at DGS Delicatessen; Café Du Monde; artwork at Mother's Restaurant; Kenny & Zuke's Bagelworks; blackboard menu at Mother's Restaurant.



USA CUISINE

Would you like salad with that?

TAKE YOUR TASTEBUDS ON A TOUR AND DISCOVER THERE'S MORE TO AMERICAN CUISINE THAN BURGERS AND FRIES

Words: Kate Parham

➤ **When most people think of American food,** visions of greasy cheeseburgers and fried chicken likely come to mind. But despite this, American food is actually one of the most distinctly diverse cuisines in the world, thanks to an influx of immigrants and bountiful agriculture calling USA home.

Take California slow food, for instance. The near-perfect weather and waterways provide a cornucopia of edible produce (think wild mushrooms, berries and hazelnuts) and sustainable seafood, like salmon, halibut and oysters. But the state also lays claim to the highest Latino and Asian American population of any state in the USA. So expect a multitude of

taquerias, dim sum joints and spirited Thai temples serving up curries so spicy you'll think you are in Chiang Mai. California is just one of many states chock-full of ethnic enclaves beloved for their hole-in-the-wall eateries and street food (from melty Philly cheesesteaks and fiery falafel, to food trucks dishing out Korean tacos and Indian samosas). The country's past means spicy tuna rolls and banh mi are just as common as steak and buffalo wings. And half the fun is trying all the dishes on offer for yourself.

Here are four quintessentially American cuisines you won't want to miss on your next trip to the land of the free... >

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Louisiana Cajun and Creole

Southern American food covers an army of cuisines, but Louisiana Cajun and Creole is easily the most unique, says Tory McPhail, chef of New Orleans' award-winning Commander's Palace, an institution since the 1800s.

"For us, it's all about history, flavour and tradition. We were doing fusion food before it was cool, when the city was getting settled by the French and Spanish. Then we threw in American Indian, African and, in the later days, Greek, Italian, Chinese and Vietnamese – that's the face of new Creole food, the foundation of which is called the holy trinity: onion, celery and green bell pepper."

Other characteristics of the cuisine include heavy seasoning (paprika, cayenne, black pepper, garlic and onion powder), salt (a means for preservation before refrigeration), hardy pig and an abundance of seafood – meaning dishes like gumbo (a spicy stew built from a rich, dark roux that cooks for hours) and etouffee (shellfish in a light roux smothered over rice) reign supreme.

"Blackened red fish started here in the 1970s, and now it's on every chain restaurant menu in America," adds Tory.

WHERE TO GET IT:

- Don't miss the chicken and sausage gumbo – an exemplary Louisiana Creole dish – at New Orleans' bustling Cochon Butcher. Bon Ton Cafe also makes a shrimp and crab okra gumbo that will blow your mind.
- Mother's Restaurant is famous for po' boys (baguettes stuffed with meat or seafood – or both). Tory likes his with lettuce, tomato, onion, mayo, ketchup and Creole mustard.
- No trip to New Orleans is complete without a stop at Café Du Monde, where beignets (deep-fried pastries covered in powdered sugar) and chicory coffee steal the show. Tory puts a modern twist on the classic at Commander's Palace with his black skillet-seared foie gras over a foie gras and candied pecan beignet.



Photo © Noah Feckes



➤ **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Chicken and sausage gumbo at Cochon Butcher; retro interiors at Café Du Monde; the opulent Commander's Palace; fresh seafood topped with vegetables and herbs at Toro; meat tasting platter at Cochon Butcher.



New England seafood

Head to northeastern USA for a bounty of fresh seafood native to the region's coastal waters (think decadent Maine lobster, Nantucket sea scallops and briny clams and oysters). The abundant fishing industry, combined with extensive dairy farming, a plethora of immigrant influences and a history of preserved foods, has resulted in a wealth of stewed, steamed and baked dishes.

Jamie Bissonnette, chef and owner of Boston's beloved Coppa and Toro restaurants, lists his favourites as salty cured fatback with fresh churned butter, velvety clam chowder, lobster salad rolls and fried clams with pickle-infused dipping sauce. "It's the balance of land and sea – you can smell it," Jamie says, before waxing poetic about clambakes, a festive tradition involving a profusion of seafood and melted butter. "Growing up, we'd take a net and mix in all the seafood with potatoes, onions and corn, and my dad would dig a hole in the ground, add seaweed and limestone, build a fire, get the rocks wicked hot, and we'd put all the food on top, sometimes pour beer over everything, and cover it with tarps. When it's done, you just dump everything onto a table covered in newspapers and grab whatever you want."

WHERE TO GET IT:

- Want to experience a classic clambake? Check out Straight Wharf Restaurant on the island of Nantucket, where buttered lobster, sweet corn, spicy chorizo, potatoes and littleneck clams take centre-stage.
- Trying to name the region's best clam chowder is like asking an Italian where to find the best bolognese. But the notorious Chatham Squire at Cape Cod puts up a strong fight – plump clams comingle with smoky potatoes, making this creamy soup one for the books.
- Lobster seekers needn't look further than James Hook + Co in Boston. The third-generation seafood shack brings their daily lobster catch from Maine and Canada down to Boston's historic waterfront. ➤

“ Preservation methods were born out of necessity, but now they’re **in vogue** here, a way to **intensify flavours** and tenderise”

American Jewish

Bagels with lox (cured salmon), smoked pastrami sandwiches and latkes (potato pancakes) are three of America’s most beloved dishes. The common thread between the plates? They all sprang from New York City delis, thanks to a large community of Eastern European Jews who set up shop after immigrating to the USA.

“Jewish food is all technique-based: smoking, curing, pickling,” explains Nick Wiseman, co-owner of Washington DC’s popular DGS Delicatessen, where all meats and fish are cured in-house. “These preservation methods were born out of necessity, but now they’re in vogue here, a way to intensify flavours and tenderise meat.”

WHERE TO GET IT:

- When you’re craving zesty pastrami or corned beef, make a beeline to Brooklyn’s Mile End, where the Reuben sandwich comes on pumpernickel bread stuffed with salt-cured beef, Swiss cheese, sauerkraut and creamy Russian dressing.
- Try the chopped liver at DGS Delicatessen, best spread on rye crackers with red-onion marmalade and chicken-skin cracklings.
- You’ll find authentic handmade bagels boiled with malt and sugar and dusted in seeds and garlic, piled high with house-cured wild salmon, pickled onions and capers at Kenny & Zuke’s Bagelworks at Portland, Oregon.



➤ FROM LEFT TO RIGHT
All meats are cured in-house at DGS Delicatessen; Tex-Mex is America’s oldest regional cuisine.

Photos © Brand USA, Joshua Cogan



Tex-Mex

“Tex-Mex always gets lumped in as a bastardisation of Mexican food, but in reality it’s America’s oldest regional cuisine,” contends Bryan Caswell, chef at Houston’s El Real Tex-Mex. “It’s a wonderful representation of the flavours of Mexico by way of Texas, the ultimate spicy comfort food,” adds Stephan Pyles, chef and owner of four Dallas restaurants and one of the founding fathers of southwestern cuisine.

Expect stacks of warm tortillas, plenty of spice (cumin, oregano, cilantro) and a wide array of chillies (jalapenos, guajillo, ancho and chipotle, to name a few).

Unlike true Mexican food, Tex-Mex has a heavy hand for melted cheese and sour cream and is almost always served with beans and rice. A Tex-Mex meal looks like this: “You’re going to get tortilla chips slapped down in front of you with a red salsa, first thing,” explains Stephan. “Complete the chip experience with chile con queso (a rich, creamy cheese dip) and then expect to be baffled by a long list of plates with every combination conceivable, usually numbered or named after someone.” These combos usually contain some amalgamation of enchiladas, tacos, quesadillas and fajitas. “It’s a communal style of eating, best done over margaritas on a patio on a warm summer day,” says Bryan.

WHERE TO GET IT:

- Order the San Antonio Puffy Taco Plate – complete with BBQ pork, smoked chicken and picadillo beef – at El Real Tex-Mex, Houston.
- In Dallas, there’s no better place for tacos than Mia’s Tex-Mex Restaurant, where warm tortillas are stuffed with tender brisket, Monterey Jack cheese, grilled onions and poblano peppers.
- One of Texas’s most authentic Tex-Mex restaurants can be found in San Antonio. Mi Tierra Cafe has been serving some of the best chilaquiles (eggs scrambled with corn tortilla strips and topped with spicy tomato sauce and cheese) since 1941. 