

**From the Melting Pot to the Stew Pot:
A Study of Inter-Ethnic Variation in Food Expenditures**

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Historically, the United States has been viewed as a receptive haven for immigrants, a place where persons from various nationalities, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds could come to live and work, ultimately to become Americans in some broad cultural sense. This is known commonly as the theory of the melting pot. But some may view this theory as too strong. For in a melting pot, individual characteristics can disappear, being completely subsumed into something new and different. Perhaps a more appropriate metaphor is America as a stew pot, in which, like ingredients of a stew, each immigrant group adds to the general flavor, and helps create a new product (American culture) that is unique in the world; yet the contributions of each group can still be identified separately, just as carrots and potatoes can be separated from the stew as a whole.

This study examines the metaphor in literal terms. That is, it examines how food expenditures differ for various European ethnic groups in the United States. Although others have studied cultural and ethnic groups such as Hispanics and non-Hispanics, no other papers found have explored the issue of European ethnicity and detailed food expenditures. Perhaps this is because many surveys that collect data on food intake or related issues do not ask about European ethnicity. However, the source of data for this study, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Diary Survey, does collect such information.

This study is comprised of two parts. First, results from a survey directed by the author are examined. The survey is designed to ascertain what common associations might exist for food and ethnicity. For example, the results show a strong association of Italian ethnicity and pasta. The second part of the study examines actual expenditure patterns, first to see to what extent the associations are valid or invalid, and second to see what other information can be found; for example, do some groups make more healthful choices than others? Many interesting—sometimes surprising—results are found and described in the study.

Endnote

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