

## Executive Summary

- A survey of the roots and evolved traditions of rustic cuisines.
- Rustic foods from around the world and American regions.
- How to translate traditional foods into manufactured products.

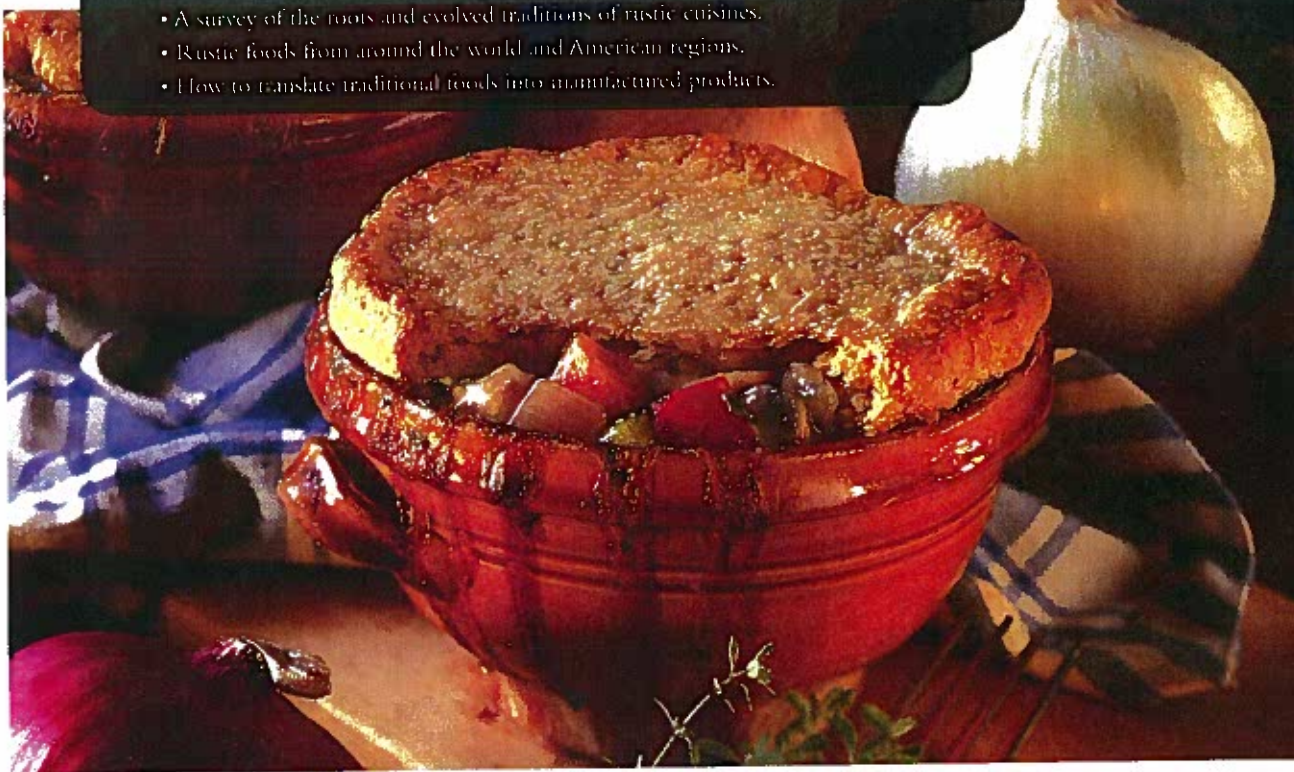


Photo: National Onion Association

# The Evolution of Rustic Cuisine

By Rachel Zemser, CCS  
Contributing Editor

**R**ustic cooking is unrefined and simple, but also warm and inviting. It is typically based on old-fashioned preparation techniques, ingredient availability and a unique set of cultural influences. Depending on the diner and the decade, it can be seen as unsophisticated and peasantlike, while a future generation may view it as retro-chic, earthy and exciting; the “peasantness” of rustic lies in the eye of the beholder.

The first half of my life was spent in Liberia, Israel and Spain, and the second half in Massachusetts, Illinois, Texas and California, so I can relate to more rustic cuisines than average. When I see rustic anything on a menu, chances are, the dish will bring me back to a former place in my life. Whether I am being dished up a bowl of New England clam “chowdaaaaah,” a smoky Texas beef brisket barbecue or Spanish *patatas bravas*, the flavors tap into my sensory chord and resonate with my global memories.

## Evolving roots

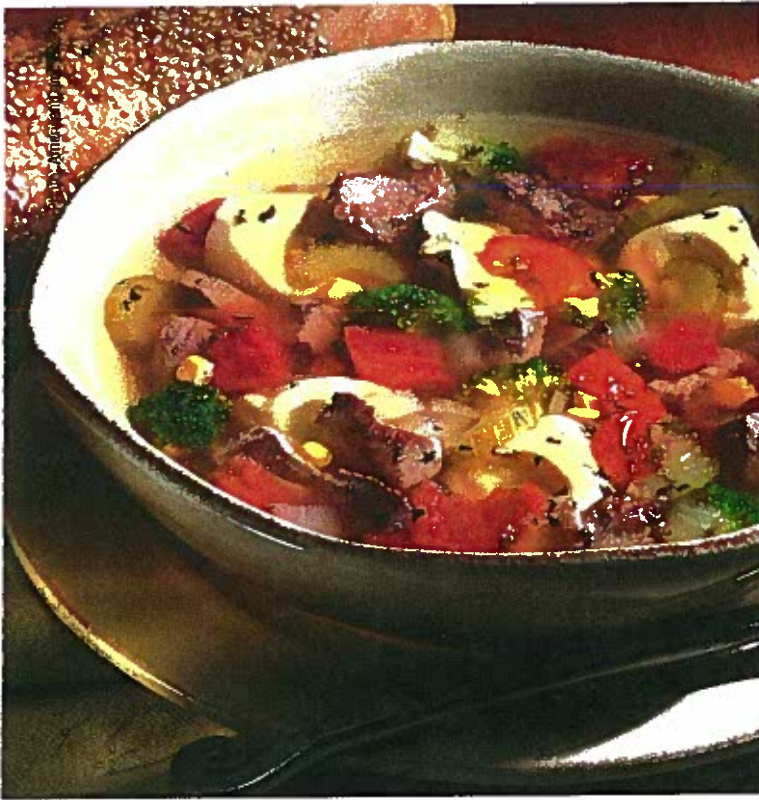
From France’s *pot au feu* to the simple stews of Ireland, rustic dishes emerged from an era where life was difficult and eating was one of the few pleasures. As years passed and people migrated, these original dishes

evolved into new rustic dishes, representing the outcome of a new generation with their own set of hardships. Over the past 150 years, the United States has received many newcomers, and as the cultures have intermingled, so has the food.

In the history of our socially stratified world, those with more money had more culinary options to choose from. The elite members of society could afford imported delicacies or private chefs to prepare elaborate and detailed dishes using exotic ingredients and sophisticated, foreign techniques. Those with less money, including the farmers and peasants, had to settle for locally grown and seasonal ingredients served with simple breads. Strenuous work and limited time called for hearty meals such as soups, stews and pies, often served with a crusty loaf of bread and some preserved pickles or cheese on the side. Long-simmered tough cuts of meat would comprise the main protein of a meal; they were inexpensive and usually came from older animals that were no longer needed on the farm.

## Our rustic world

In Ireland, sheep are plentiful, and lamb is the foundation for many farmhouse and pub dishes. Traditional



A hearty lamb and vegetable soup—perhaps with an Italian accent thanks to added tortellini and suitable spices—easily fits into the greater scope of rustic cuisine.

shepherd's pie made good use of leftover lamb and vegetables. In Paris, the first bistros evolved in the Les Halles market district for workers needing a fast, home-style meal. Classic bistro dishes included

onion soup gratin, steak *frites* and cassoulets.

I spent my last three years of high school living with a family in Cataluña, a region in northeast Spain with its own unique culture, language and cuisine. Every day after school, my *madre Catalana* would offer me some *pa amb tomaquet* (toasted bread, rubbed with tomato and covered in olive oil). From the Catalan city of Tarragona, emerged a rustic dish called *romesco de peix*. The *romesco* sauce was made of tomatoes, red peppers, garlic, onions and almonds and served with grilled fish.

To call Tuscan cooking rustic would be almost redundant, as nothing exemplifies rustic Italian cooking the way it is seen in the Tuscan countryside! A typical Tuscan meal might include *acquacotta*, a simple soup made of bread, water, onions, mushrooms and greens, followed by some *polenta con ragu di funghi porcini* (polenta with a wild mushroom sauce).

Portugal has its own adaptation of *acquacotta*, known as *acorda*, which consists of only stale bread, boiling water or broth, garlic, and cilantro. Rustic Portuguese food also includes a variety of seafood dishes, including *sardinhas assadas na brasa* (grilled sardines) and *caldeirada com mariscos* (fish stew with shellfish).

The nomadic shepherds who lived in the mountains of Greece depended on their livestock, dairy and greens for food. This led to the development of simple, portable dishes such as *pitta*, phyllo-dough-wrapped pies filled with spinach and feta.

From northern Mexico down to southern Argentina, rustic dishes take advantage of a climate that produces a wide range of fruits and vegetables. Ceviche, raw fish preserved with citrus and seasoned with cilantro, demonstrates how the unglamorous concept of food preservation is actually the epitome of culinary perfection. *Sopa de tortilla* is the Mexican version of “bread” soup, brightened with limes, chiles and *queso fresco*. *Asado*, a technique used to cook meats over an open fire, is a traditional dish of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. The working man's portable empanada, found in many Latin American countries, is a hearty, meat-filled, semicircle of pastry dough.

## Ethnic migration

Over the past 150 years, rustic dishes from Europe, Africa, Asia, South America and the Middle East have slowly worked their way into the United States and become a part of our core cuisine. Newcomers brought their own culinary traditions, which they introduced to (and even “fused” with) their neighbor's and adapted to fit their new geography and ingredient availability. The dishes that came out of this adaptation period are now considered “American food.”

Comfort food is, in a sense, the American version of ethnic rustic food. And the styles have their own unique labels like Tex-Mex, Cal-Tex and Floridian cuisine. These culinary accents continue to evolve over time.

New England, the South, the Southwest, the Heartland and the Northwest all have characteristic rustic foods that represent the history and culture of the people who settled there. In the 1620s, the pilgrims who settled in Massachusetts almost died of starvation because they initially refused to incorporate the native foods into their diet. Lobsters that had washed up on shore were left to rot because they were



considered “peasant food,” and mussels were considered the “poor man’s bivalve.” The local Native Americans saved the settlers by teaching them how to farm the land and, for the first few years, the New England diet was made up of ingredients like corn, beans, pumpkins, wild turkeys and clams. Some early rustic dishes from this period include Johnny cakes and succotash.

Portuguese fishermen eventually settled on the coast and made mussel stew, combining their love of seafood stews with the abundance of mussels in the Atlantic Ocean. Most families had an iron pot for cooking the daily meal. Rustic dishes like the New England boiled dinner—a long-simmered roast with vegetables—and baked beans came out of this one-pot era.

The Germans escaping religious prosecution found freedom in the fertile fields of Pennsylvania and, during harvest, farmers would enjoy crunchy funnel cakes with molasses or syrup. The Pennsylvania-Dutch also introduced us to chicken pot pie, an efficient use of leftover ingredients.

In 1825, the Erie Canal opened, resulting in a wave

of European immigration directly into the Heartland region. These settlers left their unique rustic mark with dishes such as German-style potato salad, corn dogs and the all-American favorite macaroni-and-cheese. Further south, classic dishes like red-eye gravy, Brunswick stew, chicken and dumplings, and sweet-potato pie make use of local ingredients and cultural traditions.

Low Country food—from coastal areas along the Southeast—contains elements from French and Spanish immigrants, and African slaves. The international trade port in Savannah connected the slaves with exotic ingredients from India, which show up in fruit chutneys and the curry-flavored “chicken curry captain.” Other Low Country dishes, like seafood gumbo, combine African okra and French-influenced Creole sauce.

Culturally different from the rest of the United States, the rustic dishes of New Orleans are influenced by the numerous cultures that have set up shop there since the early 1700s. Classic soups and stews, such as jambalaya, gumbo, crawfish étouffée and *maque choux* (corn stew), all incor-

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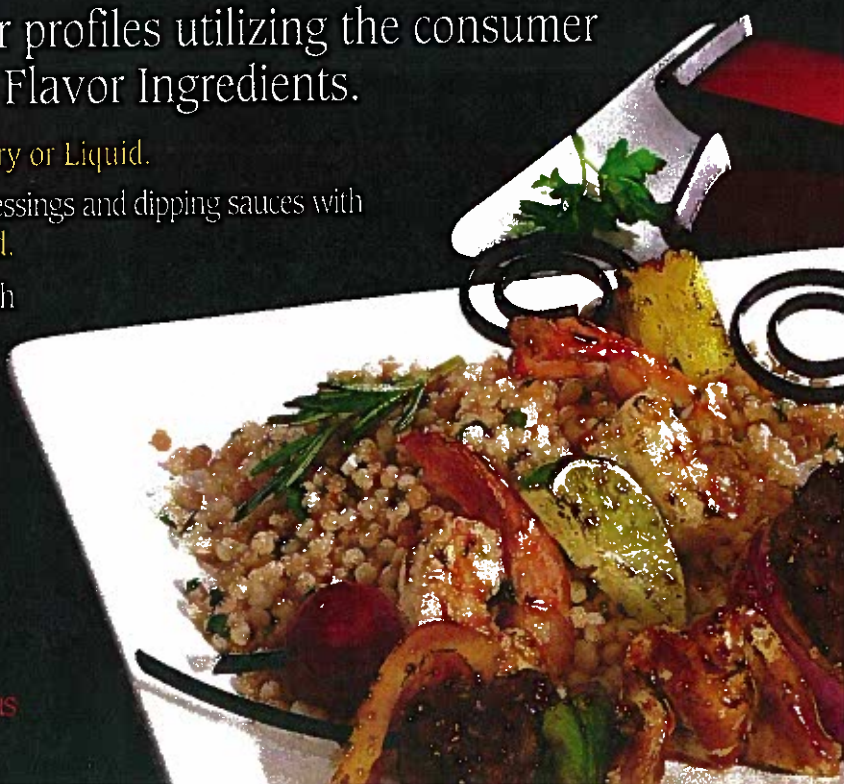
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porate the cooking styles and ingredients of the French, Spanish, Italians, Native Americans and Africans. The po' boy, a simple, meat-filled sandwich, was originally designed to feed men in the French marketplace looking for work in the early 1900s.

While Tex-Mex is the food label given to Southwestern dishes that loosely resemble Mexican food, the real rusticity of Texas originated in the Southwest with chuckwagon cooking, one-pot stews such as ranch beans and chili. Texas barbecue, a 100-year-old tradition, originated when the meat markets would smoke and cook the leftover tougher cuts of meats.

Further west, Arizona and New Mexico were settled by Native Americans and Spanish missionaries. The Native Americans grew corn and beans, while the Spanish missionaries cultivated chiles and various fruits. Navajo green chile stew and jalapeño cornbread reflect the shared culinary traditions.

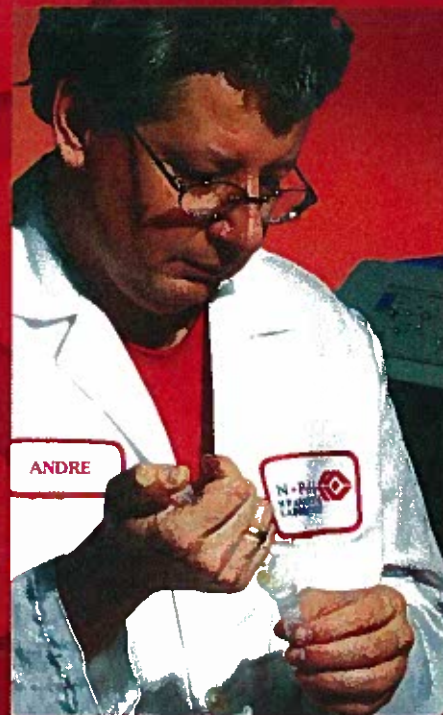
Immigrants from England and France started arriving in the Northwest in the 1700s, followed by Midwest farmers, Italians, Chinese and Japanese, and all adapted their cuisines to fit with the local ingredients. Some rustic dishes that came out of this era include Basque-style lamb stews, venison stews, baked apples and wild-huckleberry pie.

### Recreating rustic

Although the term "rustic" conjures thoughts of simplicity, it can be a challenge to recreate Old World flavors in today's restaurant kitchens and manufacturing facilities. The dishes that originated in Europe, as well as the modified versions generated here in the United States, may come across as "home-style" and friendly, but careful attention must be given to preparation techniques, ingredient selection and presentation style in order to maintain accuracy.

In individually owned restaurants where chefs are allowed to choose their ingredients and equipment, there is lots of opportunity to recreate the rustic elements of the past. Open-fire pits and brick ovens can be built to help achieve the flavors associated with barbecue, blackened meats and crusty breads.

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## Chef Rachel Zemser



Rachel Zemser, CCS, is the manager of culinary development for Kagome, Foster City, CA. She has a B.S. and M.S. in Food Science and a Culinary Arts degree from the Art Institute of New York City. She has more than 10 years of R&D experience in the food industry, specializing in culinary development, food safety and manufacturing. She is a member of the Institute of Food Technologists, the Women's Foodservice Forum and the Research Chefs Association. She can be reached at [rzemser@kagomeusa.com](mailto:rzemser@kagomeusa.com).

But take things to the chain or retail level, and consumers will not want to pay the price to bring in regionally specific ingredients. This is when product developers are required to find shortcuts and methods to recreate rusticity.

There has been a huge increase in partially prepared or already processed food components that save QSRs time and money. High-quality ingredient shortcuts exist, such as ready-to-use *roux*, reduced meat stocks, phyllo dough, and uniquely shaped dried pastas and grains. And instead of sourcing phyllo dough, a QSR can just buy frozen *spanakopita*. Authentic soups and sauces, such as the Spanish *romesco* or Mexican mole, can be developed according to a chain's specifications. Avocados can be purchased frozen without pits for easy guacamole; rustic-style breads can be manufactured, frozen and delivered; and even cubes of meats can be preseasoned and branded with grill marks, ready to go right into a pot to make an authentic European stew. Fresh vegetables can be brought in cut to whatever size and specification is required to duplicate that home-style look. Ingredient suppliers offer a huge assortment of individually quick-frozen (IQF) vegetables incorporating flavors characteristic of specific preparation techniques, such as fire-roasted, smoke-house-roasted, sautéed, grilled, caramelized or fried. Rustic dishes need the flavors from those ingredients to maintain authenticity. Some examples include Mexican

fire-roasted salsas and the vegetables for Tex-Mex fajitas, the Italian *pepperoni arrostiti* (roasted peppers), and the classic Tuscan dish *carciofi fritte* (deep-fried artichokes). All of these pretreated components can be used to recreate in minutes an authentic dish that might have taken all day 100 years ago.

Rustic foods that fall in the fresh, frozen and/or shelf-stable category and can likewise be developed using time-reducing industrial ingredients, ranging from raw and whole to sautéed, roasted sliced, diced and acidified. Many rustic-style dishes involve sautéing, fire roasting and puréeing the ingredients before the final cooking process to add signature, home-cooked flavors and textures to the final dish. Manufacturing facilities do not always have the equipment needed to roast, grill or sauté, and rely on suppliers to provide these pretreated ingredients. Time-saving frozen, refrigerated and shelf-stable purées can be added to products like chowder, *acquacotta* and *romesco* sauce—all rustic dishes that would typically involve vegetable chopping, slow cooking and grinding by hand.

The retail market already shows dozens of affordable, thermally processed products that reflect Old World and otherwise rustic themes. The Unilever brand of Classico “hand crafted recipes inspired by the regions of Italy,” is a perfect example. Campbell's also has a line of rustic soups that includes Southwestern corn soup.

Canned and jarred products that are heated to high, retorted temperatures for safety purposes can taste overcooked. Developers can improve these products by adding back flavors to adjust any altered tastes.

Frozen and refrigerated soups made by the Original SoupMan—carried at foodservice outlets and retail—use high-quality ingredients and flavors to recreate rustic bisques and soups. The company sources specialty ingredients like green-lip mussels and a variety of IQF vegetables, which cost more money but deliver a high-end product.

Given the loose culinary rules of our world, rustic food is also viewed by some chefs as an opportunity to recreate the familiar or give a rough accent to a modern dish. Perhaps 100 years from now, the complex melting pot of dishes that we have created in this country will be seen as rustic and old-fashioned to our successors—just as we see the dishes from our past in the same light. 