Chinese Food and Racial America

Food culture was an ethnic marker. Though Chinese restaurants were one of the pioneer food businesses in San Francisco, the city had only a small number of Chinese restaurants in last three decades of the 19th century when food and restaurant business was thriving. Chinese cuisine, one of the best in the world, failed to carve a niche in the city’s restaurant market. This was not a culinary failure. Anti-Chinese sentiment reached its peak during this era. Several Chinese Exclusion laws were passed from 1882 to 1904. American food culture was tainted by racial ideology. Rice became a racial symbol of Asian inferiority; beef consumption represented white American superiority. Century-long image of Chinese eating rat made many white Americans suspicious of Chinese diet. Eating in a Chinese restaurant could be culturally embarrassing or socially awkward for a middle class white family. American society judged Chinese food through racial rather than culinary criterion.