

## 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

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