
US restaurant guides: how to avoid chain restaurants (an annotated bibliography)

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Abstract

An examination of select recent (since 1995) US restaurant guidebooks. Although most provide basic information, they vary in areas they cover, intended audiences and types of restaurants included. Very few of them cover regional food or go much beyond the most basic information. This select annotated bibliography is an attempt to sort them out.

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Driving across the country can be a grueling experience. Sticking to the interstate system makes for a more direct, safer and, unfortunately, more homogenized experience. The same fast food and chain restaurants are found throughout the country along these same interstates; often it seems there are no other choices. It takes effort to find unique places to eat when traveling. Just as there are different sights to see in different parts of the country, there are unique and regional restaurants to be found throughout the country. Finding the diverse restaurants can be a challenge, but it is not impossible. There are a number of guidebooks that are national in scope and are a good place to begin a search for diverse, unique and regional restaurants in the USA. This bibliography annotates the various resources available.

I searched the following Library of Congress subject headings: Restaurants – United States, United States – Guidebooks, Food and Tourism. The resulting books I had to choose from were numerous. I limited the books to those that are national in scope. I disregarded any guidebooks that were specifically for one restaurant, one city or state or one region of the country. Obviously, some libraries in those specific areas covered would be interested in titles specific to their area. For the purposes of this bibliography, I chose not to annotate those titles.

Academic and public library collections are more likely to add the titles with a broad national scope; academic libraries supporting a tourism or hospitality industry department should be collecting these titles. In addition, they may also be interested in obtaining some of the forthcoming books in the growing area of food tourism: *Food Tourism: Food, Eating and Otherness* by Lucy Long; *Tasting Tourism: Travelling for Food and Drink* by Priscilla Boniface; or *Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets* by Colin Michael Hall.

The restaurant business is a risky one; Roy Alonzo estimates that 80 percent of new businesses, including restaurants, fail within the first year (Alonzo, 1996). In creating this bibliography I chose, with one exception, to include books that had a publication date no earlier than 1995, with the assumption that not



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all cover new restaurants, some of which may already be out of business. Because many of the books include well-known restaurants that have been in existence for many years it is a reasonable supposition that many of the entries in these books are still in business. However, change occurs and restaurants do close for no apparent reason. It is inevitable that some of the entries in the books will be defunct; given the inherent risks associated with the restaurant business, it should hardly be surprising.

Restaurant guides vary greatly in the information they provide: the types of restaurants, the areas of the country covered, the type of information about the establishments, and their intended audience. The most basic information: address, phone number, hours of operation, etc., is routinely provided. Some guides are compilations of restaurant information provided by local reviewers and volunteer contributors. Some are put together as a result of well-known chefs' suggestions. Still others are considered "special" guides – they consist of restaurants that are all of the same food type – barbeque or ethnic, for example. The guides that stand out are those that provide more comprehensive information: price ranges, specials available, history of the establishment, interesting experiences while dining. Some of these guides provide details on types of regional food found throughout the USA.

Travel guidebooks often include restaurant recommendations. National travel guidebooks such as *Lonely Planet USA* make a point of including places to eat that are "... well established and more interesting than the standard greasy spoon, fast-food franchise, pizza shop or Chinese take-out." In addition, they attempt to include "... good spots to try a local or a regional specialty ..." as well as the cheap and conveniently located places. For the most part, these guidebooks are geared toward the international traveler and include only the most popular of destinations – usually major cities and few midwestern states or cities.

It is important to keep in mind that guidebooks do not include all the available places to eat in a given area; that is the job of the yellow pages. The authors of these guidebooks are selecting eateries for various reasons to include in the books; in some cases, those

reasons are spelled out in the introduction or the text, in others it may be altogether unclear. This bibliography is an attempt to look at a sampling of recent US guidebooks and to sort out which ones may be more useful in a trek across the country.

An unexplored aspect of this endeavor is the huge variety of information available on the World Wide Web. Some of these guidebooks have Web sites; roadfood.com[1], for example, consists of contributions by Jane and Michael Stern, in addition to readers of their books. Obviously, Web sites can be more easily updated and maintained than a published book, and can be excellent up-to-date resources.

Compilation guidebooks

Where the Locals Eat: A Guide to the Best Restaurants in America (1998), Magellan Press, Nashville, TN.

This book is a compilation of "best of" restaurants from local newspapers and magazine readers' polls and suggestions by locals who are encouraged to send in their favorite restaurants. Information is basic: address, phone number and restaurant type only. Entries are alphabetical by state, then by city within the state. There is often more than one "best" restaurant in any given food category; the editor explains this is because they included all the "bests" they gathered. It is difficult to tell how much is "gathered" from "best of" polls and what is genuinely sent in unsolicited. Editor Lee Wilson mentions that no restaurant has paid a fee to be included in the guide.

America's Top Restaurants (2000), Zagat Survey, New York, NY.

One of many Zagat review publications, this focuses on restaurants found in 42 cities described as "leading culinary centers." There are 1,130 restaurants included. In order to accommodate so many establishments, the information on each is limited. There is an extensive rating system which can be confusing. Each restaurant (unless it is too new) is rated on food, décor and service on a scale of 0 to 30. Estimated meal costs are provided. Anyone can become a reviewer for the Zagat survey; the reviewers answer survey questions about restaurants that are chosen by local editors.

Reviewers' summaries and direct quotes along with phone numbers and addresses (with some cross streets) make up the bulk of the information. Attempts to make the various quotes into coherent sentences often fail.

Vegetarian Journal (1998), *Vegetarian Journal's Guide to Natural Food Restaurants in the US and Canada*, Avery, Garden City Park, NY.

Alphabetical listing by state of restaurants throughout the USA and Canada. Hours, addresses, phone numbers and a brief summary or description of what may be found on the menu is provided. Information in the guide was gathered from members of the Vegetarian Resource Group www.vrg.org[2] and from surveys sent to individual restaurants. Entries include "reviewer's choice symbols" for those restaurants that were mentioned by many members for their service and food.

Chef's choices

Dale, C. (1999), *The Chef's Guide to America's Best Restaurants*, Chef's Guide, Aspen, CO.

This compilation of recommended restaurants by 178 of America's top chefs includes basic information: address, phone numbers, Web sites, type of food, chef's name. Quotes are included (presumably from the chefs?) about the establishments, and specialties are listed. While not terribly comprehensive, this is a good place to start. Sprinkled throughout are some cooking tips solicited from the recommending chefs.

Dorenburg, A. (1998), *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.

This book is more a series of essays and interviews with restaurant critics about dining out in America than a guidebook. There is an appendix (about 60 pages long) which includes favorite restaurants of some restaurant critics. Major metropolitan areas receive primary mention.

Dorenburg, A. (2001), *Chef's Night Out: From Four-Star Restaurants to Neighborhood Favorites: 100 Top Chefs Tell You Where (and how!) to Enjoy America's Best*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.

This book expands the appendix of Durenburg's earlier work (1998) on top chefs' favorite places to eat. In this case, the bulk of

the book is devoted to chef recommendations. The chefs are quoted throughout about where they eat and why. Useful information about specials of given restaurants as well as addresses (with cross streets) and phone numbers (pp. 47-303); major metropolitan areas are emphasized.

Special guidebooks

Directory of High Volume Independent Restaurants (2000), Business Guides, Inc., New York, NY.

This annual guide includes basic information on non-chain restaurants that have at least one million dollars in annual sales, and is geared toward the sales representative. Restaurants are listed alphabetically by state and then city within the state. Information includes address, phone numbers, average check total for each meal served (breakfast, lunch or dinner), type of food service: casual, family or fine dining, type of food served: Mexican, Italian, American, Continental, etc., food wholesaler, year the restaurant was started and names of "key personnel" involved in the restaurant: owners, presidents, managers, chefs and purchasing agents. No reviews are included.

Frost, J. (2000), *The Artichoke Trail: a Guide to Vegetarian Restaurants, Organic Food Stores and Farmers' Markets Throughout the US*, Hunter: Edison, NJ.

This guide to vegetarian and vegan restaurants attempts to cover many restaurants across the country. Information gathered from the Internet and menus is provided for most establishments those the author has actually visited are reviewed more extensively. Frost also gives a little bit of information about the area – the neighborhoods, or regions of the country. A state map is provided at the beginning of each state's entries; these maps are helpful to see "at a glance" where the restaurants are located. The rating system used consists of one to four artichokes or a simple "thumbs up" for a restaurant Frost was not able to review extensively.

Israelowitz, O. (1999), *Oscar Israelowitz's Eat Your Way Through America: A Kosher Dining Guide*, Israelowitz Publishing, Brooklyn, NY.

This guide has basic information for the traveler wishing to find kosher dining and food; it includes supermarkets that may carry kosher food. The majority of the entries are found in

New York, New Jersey, California and Florida. Included are Chabad Houses and Hillel Houses usually associated with campus populations. Only restaurants and delis which are closed on the Sabbath are included. The author suggests that to find out if an establishment is still kosher, determine its Friday and Saturday hours. Listings are alphabetical by state and then city.

Labat, Carla (1997), *Satisfy Your Soul: A Guide to African American, African & Caribbean Restaurants*, Impressions Books, McLean, VA.

This guide to African American, African, and Caribbean restaurants, nightclubs and catering in the USA includes more than 300 businesses from more than 20 cities. Labat visited each establishment and interviewed the owners. Entries are alphabetical by city; within each city the restaurants are classified into one of four dining categories: fine, casual, cafeteria/buffet-style or take out. Phone numbers and addresses are included as well as meal cost estimates. Labat also employs ten easily deciphered symbols ranging from bar facilities available to valet parking. Each entry gives a brief history of the restaurant and a summary of menu items in bold type.

Thompson, J. (1995), *Trail of Flame: the Red Hot Guide to Spicy Restaurants Across America*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA.

Johnson is interested in restaurants that serve spicy and interesting food – not just hot. This guide has more than the basic information (hours, address, phone, average meal price) about restaurants the author has visited. Thompson details meals she's had, both good and bad, and why some restaurants are worth traveling long distances to sample. She includes letters from people recommending various restaurants around the country (which Thompson covers in the book) and "fiery events" that occur throughout the year.

Zibart, E., Stevens, M. and Vermont, T. (1995), *The Unofficial Guide to Ethnic Cuisine and Dining in America*, Macmillan, New York, NY.

The authors devote most of this work to explaining different ethnic cuisines from around the world. They include some history of the countries, definitions of menu items (or translations), and a breakdown of the cuisine, from ingredients to main dishes. In some cases,

they provide recipes. The list of "suggested ethnic restaurants" consists of a mere 50 pages of the book, covering only 51 cities in North America. No specific information about any one restaurant is given, just the basics – address, phone and food type. Restaurants were chosen because they were good examples of certain ethnic cuisines and for the quality of their food.

Zipern, E. and Williams, D. (1998), *The Tofu Tollbooth: A Guide to Natural Food Stores and Eating Spots With Lots of Other Cool Stops Along the Way*, Ceres Press, Woodstock, NY.

Alphabetical by state listing of stores, restaurants and co-ops throughout the USA. An extensive icon system is employed (17 symbols total, from "wheelchair accessible bathroom" to "filtered water machine"). Maps of each state show approximate locations of the entries. The authors include a "hot tips" section for some areas, with information on other recommended places to eat and visit in a given area.

Comprehensive guidebooks

Johnson, G. and Staten, V. (1998), *Real Barbecue*, Harper & Row, New York, NY.

Authors include information on how they chose the barbecue restaurants: in the South, the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, the Midwest and the West. Book consists of the "Hot 100" barbecue restaurants where the authors have eaten, pared down from nearly 700. The author's essays on each of the "Hot 100" are detailed and amusing. In most cases, they spoke to the owners and regular customers. Sprinkled throughout are barbecue facts and stories, called "porklore." *Real Barbecue* provides advice on what to look for in a barbecue restaurant, some of which applies to other types of restaurants as well. Entries include address, phone number, hours, and author's rating (from "good" to "the best we ever ate"). Includes information about what to look for when purchasing a grill or how to build your own smoker, and recipes.

Stern, Jane and Michael (1999), *Eat Your Way Across the USA: 500 Diners, Farmland Buffets, Lobster Shacks, Pie Palaces & Other All-American Eateries*, Broadway Books, New York, NY.

This work includes unique restaurants not found in most of the other guides. Coverage includes almost every state (except Alaska, Hawaii, and West Virginia) and not only the largest cities in those states, but small towns and rural areas as well. In addition to phone numbers and addresses, there are maps at the beginning of each region section showing approximately where the restaurants are located. Each entry has a personalized description of a particular visit by the Sterns and what they enjoyed eating. The entries will often include an encounter with a memorable wait staff or owner. In researching their books, the Sterns look for regional specialties. They rely on recommendations from friends, readers of their earlier books, and local people they meet. They are not interested in places that may have “great” food but are out of their region. The Sterns do not consider themselves restaurant critics; for them, eating is a passion and their books are a “. . . way to know the diversity of America through its food . . .”. This guide has about 500 entries; the authors estimate they included only ten percent of the restaurants they have visited. The others were not up to their standards.

Stern, Jane and Michael (2002), *Roadfood: the Coast-to-Coast Guide to 500 of the Best Barbecue Joints, Lobster Shacks, Ice-cream Parlors, Highway Diners, and Much, Much More*, Broadway Books, New York, NY, 494 pp., ISBN 0767908090.

This is the newest edition of the Stern's book *Roadfood*, originally published in 1977 and updated many times. They have revisited restaurants and rewritten most of the text for the 2002 edition. Phone numbers and addresses are included for each entry; there is also a regional map at the beginning of each section so one can see at a glance where restaurants are located. Once again, they are not interested in including the four- and five-star restaurants found in other guidebooks; the Sterns concentrate on food unique to a particular region of the country. Featured are the “culinary folk artists” who are cooking throughout the country.

US general travel guidebooks

Fodor's USA (2001), Fodor's, New York, NY.

Fodor's “dining” section lists only “the cream of the crop” establishments. For the most part, it includes the more expensive restaurants for a given area.

Let's Go: USA 2002: Including Coverage of Canada (2002), St Martin's Press, New York, NY.

Let's Go discusses the regional differences to be found in food across the USA in the introduction and exposes readers to what types of food they may find available in different regions. For the larger cities covered, there is a section on food. Also includes “food and night life” for the smaller areas combined.

Lonely Planet USA (2002), Lonely Planet, Melbourne, London.

In the introduction, *Lonely Planet* provides some discussion about regional specialties, i.e. what types of food a person is likely to find in a given area of the country. Throughout the book, each section includes a “places to stay and eat” specific to that area. Most entries consist of a few paragraphs.

Frommer, A. (2001), *USA*, Frommers/Transworld, London.

This work provides a “where to dine” section for each area covered; in some cases, entries are quite lengthy. For the most part, nothing out of the ordinary is included.

Notes

- 1 Roadfood.com is “A site devoted exclusively to finding the most memorable local eateries along the highways and back roads of America” (available at: www.roadfood.com).
- 2 The Vegetarian Resource Group is “is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public on vegetarianism and the interrelated issues of health, nutrition, ecology, ethics, and world hunger. In addition to publishing the *Vegetarian Journal*, VRG produces and sells cookbooks, other books, pamphlets, and article reprints” (available at: www.vrg.org).

Reference

Alonzo, R.S. (1996), *The Upstart Guide to Owning and Managing a Restaurant*, Upstart Publishing Company, Chicago, IL.