

## AFD Ep 395 Links and Notes - September 1921: Fast Food (White Castle) with guest John Leavitt [Bill/Kelley/Rachel] - Recording Sept 5

- [Bill] Intro: One hundred years ago this month in Wichita Kansas, American “fast food” chains began with the establishment of the first White Castle location, serving 5 cent burgers. This development represented a confluence of several key trends: the arrival of standardization and [assembly line mass production to food preparation](#), the beginning of the fast-paced and geographically-dispersed automobile age, and heightened public concern in the early 20th century about the reliable quality and provenance of food ingredients they were consuming. We’ll talk about all of those changes and how they came together on this week’s episode on the centennial of fast food.
- [Bill] September 13, 1921: White Castle, the first fast food chain, opens
  - (“The Rise and Fall of American Growth,” Robert J. Gordon, 2016, p.76) “The first White Castle hamburger chain opened in 1921.” “By the 1920s, major highways were lined with drive-ins of varying degrees of rustic or metallic modern appearance, sometimes with female servers in uniform.” “Howard Johnson’s nationwide chain of orange-roofed Georgian-style restaurants with its uninspired food was established in 1925.”
  - Interestingly, fast food chains of the automobile age were not the first overall chain restaurants in the United States. That had already become a force in the late 19th century with the spread of passenger rail, because Americans wanted a recognizable restaurant brand around the country. English-born entrepreneur and rail employee Fred Harvey in 1876 established the Harvey House chain alongside the Santa Fe Railroad network, with which he had an agreement. By 1901, when he died, there were 45 Harvey House restaurants and 20 Harvey Dining Cars, spanning 12 states. He had built a dining location every 100 miles, where the steam locomotives would take on water and fuel. The railroad itself shipped in the fresh food to these locations by refrigerator car (which we covered in our February 2021 Patreon episode #351 on the ice industry: <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/02/17/preview-feb-17-2021-the-natural-ice-trade-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-351/> ) The emergence of these chain railroad restaurants – to replace either a total lack of food or very bad, often unsafe and spoiled food – is one factor credited in making long-distance rail travel popular and viable for Americans, especially in the western United States, as contrasted with the densely populated eastern states that could support independent restaurants near rail stations regardless of passenger traffic. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred\\_Harvey\\_Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Harvey_Company) (We’re not going to get sidetracked on this episode by getting deep into their policies on waitresses.)
- [Bill] The first location in Wichita was 10 feet by 15 feet with 5 counter stools. The hamburgers were on the smaller side, which eventually points toward their signature Hamburger Slider. For branding purposes, the business put architectural flourishes on the building to make it look a bit like a castle, consistent with their name and logo, which they continue to do. They were imitated about 5 years later by another Midwest competitor called “White Tower” out of Milwaukee. (“Symbols of America” by Hal Morgan, 1986.) Part of the castle branding was supposed to call to mind noble purity of chivalric values to signal the food was safe and good, which is a theme we’ll circle back to in a bit. <https://www.saveur.com/article/Kitchen/Chain-Reaction/> Ultimately, White Castle never became a massive fast food chain because it was never franchised, and so it remained relatively constrained to the Midwest and some other nearby states, but it had nevertheless become an important pioneer in the industry. There are a few hundred White Castle locations in the US today, compared to 14,000 McDonald’s locations. One

place where White Castle exists, unlike New England, is New York state. So we dispatched co-host Kelley to do some field work today.

- [Kelley] Field Trip + White Castle's History of Itself - <https://www.whitecastle.com/about-us/our-history>
  - Only mentions Ingram as the founder
  - 1921 - First fast food hamburger food chain
  - 1927 - Invents carryout
  - 1930 - "Not only do our Sliders taste good, they're good for you". U of Minnesota student eats only White Castle for 13 weeks straight and study shows he is in good health.
  - 1996 - First website for a quick serve restaurant
  - 2018 - First fast food chain to adopt the impossible burger
- John to talk about the contemporary Hygiene Movement influences on White Castle's design
  - Hygiene in the pre-antibiotics era and the role of modernist design in attempting to promote cleanliness
    - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1251640/> ("What Tuberculosis did for Modernism: The Influence of a Curative Environment on Modernist Design and Architecture" by Margaret Campbell | Med Hist. 2005 Oct 1; 49(4): 463–488. doi: 10.1017/s0025727300009169)
  - Food safety: This was less than a decade and a half after the Pure Food and Drug Act took effect in 1907. Ground beef in particular had become publicly unpopular since "The Jungle" by Upton Sinclair was published in 1906, and any potential burger chain would have to change public perception.
  - <https://www.saveur.com/article/Kitchen/Chain-Reaction/>

[Rachel] Sidebar: Automats (in the US, vs Europe)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automat>

- Automats were first introduced in Berlin in 1895. The first automat was named Quisisana.
- The US imported the concept in 1902, with the first automat opening in Philadelphia by Horn & Hardart, who would go on to build the largest chain of automats in the US. Horn & Hardart imported automat vending machines from German manufacturer Automat, sold by enterprising salesman Max Sieleff, who believed that America would be receptive to the new technology.
- The first automats accepted only nickels, and automats had "nickel-throwers", cashiers - often women - who gave diners the nickels they needed to dispense food from the windows.
- Food was dispensed through the windows that are the iconic image of the automat, and many automats also served food through a cafeteria style line where food was ladled from tureens.
- Automats were popular through the 1970s, especially among down-and-out creators in the arts, but they were threatened by the rise of fast food, where there was more flexibility for payment, and food was served over counters.
- The inflation of the 70s also killed the automat, as many didn't have bill acceptors and carrying the required change became unwieldy (difference here between US and European currency, which has large denomination coins).
- The last Horn & Hardart automat closed in 1991.
- There have been a few forays into reincarnating the automat in the US, all centered in major metropolises. *A company called Bamn! opened a new [East Village Dutch-style automat store in 2006](#),<sup>[9]</sup> but it closed in 2009.<sup>[10]</sup> In 2015,*

another attempt was made, by a San Francisco company called Eatsa, which opened six automated restaurants in California, New York and the District of Columbia, but closed them all by 2019. The company rebranded itself as [Brightloom](#), and continues to sell automation technology to restaurants (which includes software for ordering kiosks, mobile apps, digital signage, etc., to facilitate order pickup). Brightloom had been providing ordering technology to Wow Bao, but recently ended technological support in July 2020.

- The [COVID-19 Pandemic](#) has inspired a new wave of automat revival attempts, to adapt to the deadly disease and the desire for [contactless dining](#). Joe Scutellaro and Bob Baydale opened an Automat Kitchen in Jersey City's [Newport Centre shopping mall](#) in early 2021, which uses technology similar to what Brightloom offers, and specializes in fresh food. <sup>[1][12]</sup> Another is the Brooklyn Dumpling Shop, which as of 2021 is still planning to open in the East Village, not far from the Bamn! Location.

<https://www.foodandwine.com/lifestyle/return-of-the-automat>

- By contrast, there are still automats in many European countries. They appear to enjoy the most popularity in the Netherlands, where there are still many 24-hour automats, with the FEBO chain. They serve fried fast foods, such as croquettes, as well as hamburgers and sandwiches. They are popular with late-night crowds leaving bars and clubs.
- There are also automat-style convenience vending machines, that dispense items like onions and cheese, which are popular in France.
- Interesting note: the wikipedia article mentioned conveyor-belt sushi restaurants, which are quite popular worldwide, but not the typical image of an automat.
- Lisa Hurwitz doc premiering at Telluride this year

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/the-automat-telluride-2021-1235007875/>

*The late Ruth Bader Ginsburg talks about the importance of the place to a working woman without a lot of cash. In fact, Automats were a great equalizer. Single women felt comfortable eating alone there, and there were no racial barriers either. Colin Powell speaks about the outings that he and his family took to the Automat when he was growing up.*

[Bill] Also another forerunner to a kind of communal urban food provision, from the private sector, was the liquor lobby's vast subsidies to urban saloons in the US at the turn of the century to provide free lunch to laborers with any purchase of a 5 cent beer, as a way of building customer loyalty. ("The Rise and Fall of American Growth," Robert J. Gordon, 2016, p.75) "A typical saloon meal might consist of some rye bread, baked beans, cheese, sausage, sauerkraut, and dill pickles." The liquor industry bought food in volume and distributed it to saloon owners. We can imagine an alternate timeline where city governments, or perhaps the federal government under its extensive regime of agricultural subsidies and price-stabilization purchases, took over the provision of free lunches to the American working class in US cities.

I know John has some ideas on a potential future for the restaurant industry given the apparent unsustainability of private-sector operation of restaurants in view of high land rents and rising wage pressures.