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GROCERIES

The End of the Ethnic Food Aisle

BY SAM WORLEY / **05.17.17**

SAVE ARTICLE

If you search for dried navy beans at the Jewel-Osco supermarket in River Forest, Illinois, you'll find them stocked in two separate locations. First, where you'd expect: beneath a sign that says "rice and beans." And then they're an aisle or two over, as well, in the Hispanic foods section, next to other "ethnic" items: Thai curry mixes, Japanese noodles. Exact same product: a one-pound bag of beans. The only difference is that the latter is sold under the Goya brand—a major Hispanic label—and the former isn't.

I mentioned this weird split to Tracey Deutsch, a historian at the University of Minnesota and the author of *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Government, and American Grocery Stores, 1919-1968*. "That's so telling, right?" she said. "Because what's in the ethnic-food aisle is about the brands, not the

food. It's about how that food is being framed." It's about a whole array of assumptions that lie behind which foods are considered "ethnic" and which aren't. Spaghetti, for instance, was once considered ethnic, as Deutsch pointed out. It isn't anymore. Same for German hot dogs. Or Jewish rye bread.

At the Copps grocery store in Manitowoc, Wisconsin—to pick another random example, or more accurately to just reveal another place I happen to have been lately—you'll find Frontera- and Xochitl-brand corn chips in a section labeled "Hispanic foods," while the same product made by Tostitos keeps its place in the good old snacks section.

So what good is the ethnic aisle? Does it help us navigate the supermarket? Or does it only confuse our understanding of what, exactly, we're shopping for?

Let's linger on Goya a moment, and the 2,000 products the company offers. Its array of products is vast—what other manufacturer sells coconut water, olive oil, parboiled hoppin' john, organic quinoa and bright-orange Sazon seasoning mix? In fact, in many supermarkets, Goya transcends the "ethnic" label altogether, staking claim to an entire aisle devoted entirely to its products. When I visited its headquarters last fall in Jersey City, New Jersey, the company had recently launched an organic olive oil, which Goya president and CEO Robert Unanue hopes will take advantage of that strange ethnic/nonethnic split on grocery shelves: He wanted to see the new product in the Goya aisle *and* in the cooking oil section. Might as well take advantage.

The olive oil goes back to Goya's roots as a Spanish-foods importer, founded in Lower Manhattan in 1936 by Don Prudencio Unanue, an immigrant from Spain by way of Puerto Rico. At first it sold olives, olive oil, sardines. But when Puerto Ricans began moving to New York in the 1950s, Goya moved to accommodate them, expanding into products like *gandules*—pigeon peas. And so on and so on, with each successive wave of Latin immigration. "Then of course the Cubans come," Robert Unanue said, bringing with them dishes like *moros y cristianos*—black beans and rice. "Dominicans come in with a different cuisine. With the Peruvians, you've got the ceviches, you've got the *aji amarillo*."

For decades Goya has been minutely attuned to the nuances of U.S. immigration and emerging Latino communities, adding to its product line with every group of new arrivals. The dried beans alone tell a story about Latin American food traditions, each harking back to a specific place—Goya sells canary beans for the Peruvians, cranberry beans for the Colombians, black beans for a variety of nationalities. "We like to say we're united by a language and separated by the bean," Unanue said.

Goya found that its products have shelf appeal beyond Latin American immigrant communities, too—with cooks from non-Latin cultures who use some of the same ingredients. “We do a tremendous amount of business in the African-American community in the general market,” Unanue said, with products like that hoppin' john mix. Goya’s number-two-selling bean is the lentil, popular with Indian cooks. And these days the company is going after health-minded consumers, too. “From Peru today, we bring quinoa, chia, amaranth—a lot of the supergrains,” Unanue said. “We’re bringing in acai from Brazil.” In 2005 the company launched an ambitious ten-year plan that expanded its product offerings from 900 to 2,000-some items, and later opened a sleek, brand-new headquarters in Jersey City; by 2013 Forbes was describing Goya as “one of America’s fastest-growing food companies.”

The creation of the ethnic aisle depended on the creation of the supermarket—a style of self-service, one-stop shopping that requires aisles as an organizing system. Prior to its invention, shoppers bought dry goods at dry-good stores, meat at the butcher, produce at the greengrocer. “If you lived in an ethnic neighborhood, you shopped in an ethnic grocer in your neighborhood,” said David Gwynn, the proprietor of a fascinating website, Groceteria, devoted to supermarket history. Supermarkets emerged starting in the 1930s, and soon major grocery chains were consolidating—closing small stores in favor of fewer, larger ones.

Gwynn traces the ethnic aisle to the middle of the 20th century and a newfound interest in international flavors on the part of servicemen who’d traveled the world during World War II. “What the ethnic aisle meant in those days, it was primarily toward a white suburban population—your canned Chun King and LaChoy Chinese food,” Gwynn said. (Consider, for instance, that the popular Chun King brand was started by a Minnesotan named Jeno Paulucci.) Gwynn points out that ethnic aisles then might’ve also featured “really exotic things like spaghetti sauce and pizza kits.”

Nowadays, of course, the notion of spaghetti sauce or pizza as “exotic” is ludicrous—which only demonstrates how the "ethnic" label dissolves as foods are absorbed into the American food lexicon. The category has been criticized for enforcing a kind of culinary hierarchy—an argument the sociologist Krishnendu Ray made made recently in his book *The Ethnic Restaurateur*. The term “ethnic,” Ray submits, primes American consumers to expect certain immigrant foods to be cheap, while other cuisines, like French, are free to command higher prices. This has nothing necessarily to do with the quality of ingredients or the style or complexity of a given dish—it's simply about where it's from.

“When we call food ethnic, we are signifying a difference but also a certain kind of inferiority,” Ray said last year in an interview.

“It would be weird to look for bagels in ethnic-food aisles,” said Tracey Deutsch, the historian. “So ethnic-food aisles do social work. They frame certain kinds of foods, and certain brands, as quote-unquote ‘ethnic’— by which people usually mean nonwhite, or not fully white. What’s so interesting to me as a historian is how blurry that line is.”

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One place the line is increasingly blurry is in the Latin-foods market, the one Goya helped create and diversify, presaging an age when the Latino demographic would be highly sought-after—and whose foods are increasingly integrated into the rest of the store. A 2009 Associated Press article, "Hispanic Foods Moving Out of the Ethnic Aisle," described major retailers' attempts to appeal to Latino shoppers, who, the article noted, tend to spend more on groceries than the average consumer, and tend to cook from scratch more and seek out more fresh items. In the aughts, Walmart experimented with a freestanding "Supermercado" concept at a couple locations in Texas (it's since abandoned the project) and the chain Publix opened Latino grocery stores it called Publix Sabor.

What "ethnic" means, too, can depend on where in the country you happen to be, and what the prevailing demographics are. "Where different parts of the country are integrated—like Miami, which is 65 percent Hispanic—we're not in a section," Goya's Unanue told me. The Miami satirical website *The Plaintain* made fun of this fact in an article purporting to announce that Sedano's, a local grocery chain, had launched "new ethnic food aisles for Anglos," who could find there "almond milk, brussels sprouts, goji berries, kombucha, gluten-free crackers, and assortments of artisanal jams sold in mason jars."

The satire continued: "'South Florida is a community of immigrants,' said Carlos Perez-Santiago, a Sedano's spokesperson. 'We are proud to provide our newly arrived Anglo neighbors with food from their homeland.'"

The ethnic aisle, a consumer consultant told the AP in 2009, will eventually "evolve into everybody's aisle"—the entire grocery store as melting pot. Those aforementioned Anglo consumers are more comfortable than ever with foods from the so-called ethnic section—look at the popularity of ingredients like fish sauce and Aleppo pepper. And then there's Sriracha, of course, a version of which is

now produced by none other than the Frank's RedHot company. You'll find it in the hot-sauce section, under the label "Slammin' Sriracha," along with the rest of the condiments. Here's hoping the rest of the ethnic aisle gets incorporated the same way.

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