I was having dim sum at Ming Court on International Drive last weekend with a group of Taiwanese and Taiwanese-Americans, and the conversation took its usual turn:

Eater #1: "There is no food in Florida."
Eater #2: "I know, I can't get decent noodle soup here."
Eater #3: "My daughter will attend Stanford Medical School in the Fall."
Eater #4: "My son chose Harvard. It's really inconvenient that we have to cook every day just to get real food"
Eater #5: "These chicken feet are especially good."

The problem is that the world's wealthiest nation (so far) is not particularly good with food. I have a crisis with this about twice a day. At lunch, I ask myself, Why can't I step out of my office and get really good food, fast and cheap, healthy? When I was on sabbatical at National Taiwan University, here were my options:

- Two on-campus full-service Chinese restaurants
- Two on-campus burger-ish joints (using "burger" loosely)
- Several distribution points for boxed lunches (rice + meat + vege + egg + chopsticks) => US$1.50
- Over 50 tiny - to - medium size "restaurants" ringing the campus, ranging from 4 chairs in front of a wheeled cart to 20 tables under A/C.
- One each of the major American fast food chains, or clones thereof
- Seven-11 and other convenience markets, selling Chinese lunch and snack food

My favorite lunch was a bowl of beef noodle soup, "hóng-shao níu-ròu mian," US$3. If Campbell's soup, or any soup you've eaten in American, comes to mind, it's time to travel. Around Florida Tech, I understand you can get a single slice with one topping at the Mighty Mushroom for $2.65+tax. 可憐的.
Surely NTU is a lot bigger than Florida Tech, but it is not 2500% bigger. I have studied and worked at huge American universities, such as Ohio State, where there is also no food. NTU students aren’t bigger spenders than FIT students—tuition is virtually free, if you can come out in the top 1% of the entrance exam—so all kinds of (brilliant) people can go to school there. It’s something else.

The second crisis comes at dinner. (Students: this is your future.) After a hard day mulling over epistemological movements in cultural psychology, cooking can be nothing but trivial and tedious. My wife, a Harris engineer, has been struggling with UNIX and C++ for 9 hours and is similarly disinclined (read: essentially comatose). In Taipei, US$20 and 30 minutes will realize some truly great food for two, probably just down the street; in Melbourne, well, there is the new Golden Corral on Palm Bay Road, across from the Super Wal-mart. 可憐的！

As a social scientist, I feel obligated to explain this cultural failing, not just complain about it. But I don’t have a theory. Perhaps if we weren’t plagued with multinational fast-food chains there would be more variety or regional cuisines would have survived. Another possibility is that our immigrant ancestors were the ones who were forced out of their native lands because they were bad cooks or indifferent eaters—but that wouldn’t explain Chinatowns.

Newsweek magazine last week printed a short op-ed piece praising food and eating in Taipei that I could have easily written myself. The author is probably back in the States now, hungry. So am I.

1. I also recommend Chan’s Chinese Cuisine on E. Colonial Dr. just east of Little Saigon for dim sum.
2. Pitiful.
I don’t want to minimize the finely remodeled SUB café or the great work of the University food service, but ultimately, this is not real food.
3. But in defense of Harris, their monitors have fantastic scan rates and they get great office chairs.
4. Still pitiful.