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Author(s): Priscilla P. Clark

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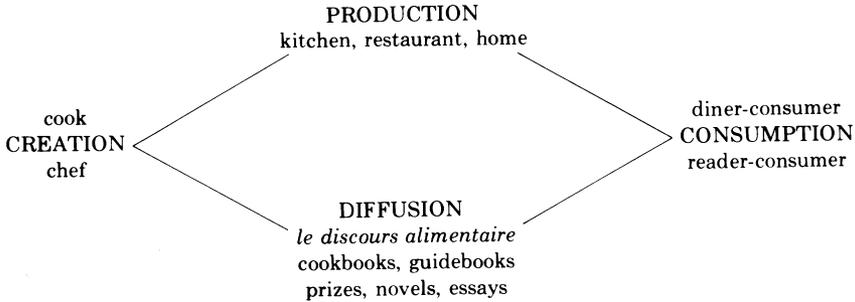
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# Thoughts for Food II: Culinary Culture in Contemporary France

by Priscilla P. Clark

Le plaisir de la table est de tous les âges, de toutes les conditions, de tous les pays et de tous les jours; il peut s'associer à tous les autres plaisirs, et reste le dernier pour nous consoler de leur perte. (Brillat-Savarin, Aphorisme VII)

THE PRODUCTION OF cuisine is both a culinary and a cultural process, which involves what may be termed a culinary system. This system has distinct sectors for the creation, production, diffusion and consumption of cuisine, functions which can be represented in the following diagram:



The strictly culinary or alimentary product concerns the cook, the kitchen, the dining room and the diner. The *discours alimentaires* join chef and diner as well as cook and diner, and implants the culinary product in an ambient culture. For consumers may be readers as well as diners (if only by reading the menu). Chefs have an immediate public in the restaurant, but a long range one through cookbooks, guidebooks, even novels. The fate of French or any other cuisine involves the whole culinary system, for cuisine, like other cultural products, needs to be examined with reference to the society of which it is part and which it in turn expresses.

*Creation.* It is obvious that the gastronomy of the nineteenth-century gastronome is no more. It was perhaps inevitable that from within the kitchen itself early in the twentieth century should come a reaction against an elaborate and extravagant cuisine that prized the sauce and the stuffing to the

detriment of the base (a not infrequent criticism of French cuisine still), a reaction against a gastronomy that too often sought complexity for its own sake.

But this is by no means the whole of the picture. The gastronomy practiced by the nineteenth-century gastronome in Paris and the consequent myth of French cuisine grew out of and depended upon very specific social circumstances. The culinary system of the nineteenth-century—a system which included the ill-nourished multitudes along with the replete few—was tied to a particular stage in the social, economic, even political development of French society. Changes in that society necessarily changed the culinary system, relations of individuals within that system and its products. Again, it is instructive to draw a parallel with the evolution of literature and the literary system (writer, publisher, critic, reader), the relations therein and the products thereof. Many of the forces which acted upon the culinary system in the twentieth century had earlier transformed the literary system: the expansion of the public and indeed of the whole system, the substitution of numerous models for a single frame of reference, the consequent pluralism of the kingdom of letters, and its stratification into elite and non-elite or popular audiences.

Restaurants have of course always been highly stratified, in terms of price, decor, service etc. But if there were many types of cooking, the true gastronome recognized only one cuisine, French, which meant Parisian. That is no longer the case. The culinary system of the late twentieth century is highly pluralistic because it recognizes, hence legitimates, not one cuisine but several, from Provençal to Chinese. Less than ever is gastronomy confined to a repertoire of recipes, with inflexible rules and regulations.

*Consumption.* The most important change in the culinary system, most important because it subsumes all the others, was its expansion, in each of its several sectors and overall. But as the expanded literary system of the nineteenth century was not simply a larger system but a different one from that of the eighteenth century, so the expanded culinary system of the mid- and late twentieth century is very different from its predecessor. If cuisine as a cultural product is like all cultural products in being a “public good,” then in the twentieth century it has become more public because it has more of a public, more consumers, potential and actual. A rising standard of living in Western societies has made it possible for more people to afford good food, and a rise in the standard of living is invariably translated by a rise in consumption of items theretofore considered luxuries, especially meat. Another indicator of a search for quality is the increase in France in the consumption of *appellation contrôlée* wines: from 5% of total consumption in 1950, *appellations contrôlées* accounted for double that in 1970, despite a decline in total consumption of wine.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Specifically from 6.7 liters in a total of 131.3 liters per inhabitant in 1950 (5.1%) to 11.4 liters in a total of 107.5 liters in 1970 (10.6%) (“L’Alimentation en Europe,” *Le Monde*, 6–7 mai 1973, p. 18). In the second half of the nineteenth century the average Frenchman increased his

At the same time, however, the elite public that supported nineteenth-century gastronomy is no more. Those who had been nurtured in the tradition of gastronomy as a way of life saw their fortunes depleted by the very considerable inflation at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after 1914. The rentier-gastronome had a hard time of it. To be sure, the world today does not lack for millionaires, but millionaires tend to be made rather than born, and the making of millions precludes considering gastronomy as a full-time occupation. Further, self-made men, of the Horatio Alger or *jeune homme frais émoulu de la province* type, are not likely to come from families which favored or could favor the excesses associated with gastronomy at its height. And, for the Jet Set, the Beautiful People, *le Tout Paris* or whomever one designates as the fortuné few, other consumption activities compete with gastronomy, notably the even more expensive pleasures of travel: jets cost more than champagne, no matter how much caviar is added to the bill.

Consequently, the consumers of twentieth-century cuisines are far more heterogeneous a group than the gastronomes of the last century. As the expanded reading public in the early nineteenth century demanded literature more to its liking, so restaurant clienteles in the twentieth century require a more varied bill of fare. As the automobile took Parisians to the provinces, as the French came in contact with exotic lands (as colonialists first, as travelers more recently), they explored other cuisines. Foreign restaurants flourish in the Paris of the 1970s as do regional restaurants, both responding to the demand for variety (for the wallet as well as the palate, we may note).

The pluralism of cuisine, the multiplicity of publics, mean that cuisine fulfills several social functions. Whereas in earlier times cuisine was either a necessity or a luxury, depending on the consumer's place in the socio-economic hierarchy, today cuisine is far more a matter of choice. It is neither a question of eating to live *au jour le jour* nor again a matter of living to eat, as it was for the dedicated gastronome.

Still, as it did in nineteenth-century France and as it has done before and since, cuisine visibly demonstrates one's social status. And French cuisine still retains most of its prestige even though it shares the attention of those interested in the culinary arts with other cuisines. Its past associations with luxury and wealth continue into the present, and French cuisine remains a privileged consumption activity which may manifest an identity with an upper status group. Elegance and luxury virtually require French cuisine, much as they have for centuries.

Other national cuisines betoken other affiliations. Ethnic cuisines in the United States, foreign and especially regional cuisines in France, serve to reinforce identification with a group. For "insiders," ethnic or regional cuisine preserves a tradition, a way of life in danger of losing its distinctiveness in the

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consumption of wine and potatoes by 50%, of meat, beer and cider by 100%, of spirits by 200%, and of sugar and coffee by 300% (J. H. Clapham, *The Economic Development of France and Germany, 1815-1914* [Cambridge: University Press, 1966], p. 403).

larger society. An Alsatian restaurant in Paris or indeed anywhere outside Alsace, Lithuanian, Italian, Serbian, Chinese, or whatever restaurants reaffirm an identity and a resistance to assimilation to national norms. For “outsiders,” on the other hand, these same restaurants may serve as reminders of vacations afar, or in lieu of such travel.<sup>2</sup> This culinary pluralism makes it possible to adapt cuisine to the individual far more than ever before, to express individual as well as group identity. Drawing on the range of cuisines from Central Europe to Southeast Asia, the eclectic host or hostess may compose a menu tailored to a highly personalized taste.<sup>3</sup>

Cuisine may also affirm ideology. Natural food cultists, who are no doubt more visible in the United States but becoming more so in France, affirm a way of life and an attitude which condemn much of contemporary industrialized society and its industrialized food. This “natural” conception of food registers a protest against an entire civilization and its discontents, against its hyper-refinements no less than its waste. The recent film, *La Grande Bouffe*, updates the metaphor of a society eating its way to destruction. In France, where gastronomy has been so important, the reaction is against the *grande bouffe* whereas in the United States, which has no such tradition, the proponents of organic food products and so on are more likely to be concerned with the multi-processed foods, with the chemical additives that “denature” food. In this sense gastronomy merges with Coca Cola and *le fast food* as manifestations of a decadent society. Those who oppose this society and its foods reverse the Lévi-Straussian circuit in order to return *des cendres au miel*; that is, their goal is to move from an overcooked, over elaborate product of a literally burned out civilization back to the products of nature. This ideological disposition coupled with a concern for health ensures a block of consumers who are not likely to be supportive of the *grande cuisine* practiced by nineteenth-century culinary notables like Carême.

Yet each culture reacts to social changes with reference to particular traditions. The simplification of the *grande cuisine* of the nineteenth century became a byword of chefs early in the twentieth century. A *retour aux sources* may mean for a Frenchman a return to provincial cuisine. More generally, the stress placed on selecting the best products—great chefs invariably indicate that they personally supervise the marketing and that much of their success depends on this vigilance—and on resisting facility of preparation and shoddy produce is what a gastronomic conscience is made of. Canned foods, processed foods, frozen foods for the most part, additives and preservatives in excess are anathema to the gourmet as well as to the food cultist. And what, a

<sup>2</sup> Thus Des Esseintes substitutes dinner in a Parisian English tavern for the trip to England. “A quoi bon bouger, quand on peut voyager si magnifiquement sur une chaise? N’était-il pas à Londres dont les senteurs, dont l’atmosphère, dont les pâtures, dont les ustensiles, l’environnaient?” (J. K. Huysmans, *A rebours* [Paris: Fasquelle, 1968], p. 178).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. David Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 142–44. The tendency toward eclecticism has become decidedly more general since Riesman first noted it in 1950.

Frenchman would surely ask, is more natural than wine? To which one could add truffles, caviar, and a host of other delicacies.

All of this obviously takes time, both in the preparation and in the consumption of meals, and certainly the obstacle presented to culinary excellence by the necessity of time and care is a formidable one in a society where *les snack bar* and *les selfs* proliferate, where Wimpy's and MacDonald's and *le drugstore* (all three currently on the Champs Elysées) cater to the hurried and the harried. The long lunch has not altogether disappeared, but with the postwar increase of office and factory canteens and the consequent reduction of the lunch break to one hour, it is certainly on the way to disappearance, although less so in the provinces where traditions resist more forcefully.

Still, the emphasis of the French culinary system, in contrast to the American, is on the consumer of professionally prepared cuisine. The culinary column in *Le Monde*, entitled "Les Plaisirs de la Table," discusses restaurants, not recipes. The same is true for *Le Figaro*, *L'Express* and other media, whereas in the United States recipes seem to be more in evidence. To be sure, the *New York Times* regularly rates restaurants in addition to printing recipes, but it is not a national newspaper as the French media are. The various guidebooks in France have a national, and intense audience lacking for such American counterparts as the A.A.A. guide, Holiday Magazine and others. The Michelin, Julliard, and Kléber Guides are more critically oriented, the better to serve the exigent consumer.<sup>4</sup>

The relative emphases of the French and American culinary systems are tied to their respective social situations. If American media are oriented to the cook first, this is no doubt related to a general American predilection for doing things oneself, but specifically to the scarcity of domestic help. This has been the case in the United States for all but the very rich since the 1930s at least whereas in France this lack has more recently become true. The truth of the matter is that traditionally the *bourgeoise* did not really need to cook, and so she did not learn to do so. To give Françoise ideas about cuisine, Marcel's mother in *A la recherche du temps perdu* sends her out to eat and observe in fashionable restaurants; she did not herself think to interfere personally. (A popular cookbook dating from the early part of the twentieth century is significantly entitled *Comment on forme une cuisinière: petit guide de la maîtresse de maison*.) The *maîtresse de maison* needed to know her *fournisseurs* more than how to make an omelette, and it is still often true that if you are invited to dinner in a French home, the hostess will be apt to vaunt the pastry from *un tel*, the fruit from *tel autre*, and so on. Not so the American woman, who would boast (were she to boast) that she had made everything

<sup>4</sup>The A.A.A. Guide does not rate restaurants, and the Mobil Guide representative disclaims any similarity to the Michelin enterprise: "Some places with really great food we might not rate at all, because they're dirty. That same place might be rated quite differently by Michelin" (quoted in Linda Scarbrough, "AAA and Mobil: A Traveler's Guide to the Travel Guides," *New York Times*, 12 January 1975, section 10, p. 1).

herself (or semi-apologised if she had not). Of course, it is to be remembered that more specialized sources of supply exist in France.

The critical consumer-diner orientation of the French culinary system is also attributable to a French tradition of dining out, often *en famille*. Indeed, it is not uncommon to be invited out to dinner in a restaurant, and one can have shared meals with a Frenchman without having so much as glanced at his *salle à manger*. Americans, on the other hand, are notorious for inviting people at the drop of a hat, to the proverbial (*in*)-*fortune du pot*. Recipes are as necessary for the American host or hostess as restaurant guides and *bonnes adresses* are for the French.

These situations are changing, on both the American and French fronts; with the gradual disappearance of domestic help from France (a Portuguese or Spanish *bonne à tout faire* is not likely to have particular competence in the domain of French cuisine) and with the interest in foreign cuisines, recipes become more important. French radio has presented a series, “Un grand chef dans votre cuisine,” with step-by-step instructions for the chef’s favorite recipes. Furthermore, restaurant dining has declined: the Paris of 1939 served 1,000,000 meals daily; postwar scarcity brought this figure to 250,000 in 1952, but affluent 1968 increased the total to only 400,000.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, on the other hand, increasing affluence and education, interest in travel, have already increased the number of magazines devoted to gastronomy, oenology, specialty shops and sources of supply, as well as critical and sophisticated ratings of restaurants.

*Diffusion.* Between the creation of cuisine and its consumption must come its diffusion. Between the chef and the consumer stand the individuals and media which disseminate the *discours alimentaires*. As gastronomic literature was responsible for the transformation of French cuisine in the nineteenth century, so diffusion in the twentieth century remains the sector most crucial to the maintenance of gastronomical interest and excellence. The *discours alimentaires* are of two sorts. For the cook there are cookbooks, but also newspaper columns, magazines, cooking schools and television. Diffusion in the American culinary system is or seems largely directed at the amateur cook. Americans are notorious for liking to do things themselves: “home made” is an adjective redolent of virtues particularly American. Whence the proliferation of recipes, from the daily newspaper to domestic housekeeping magazines

<sup>5</sup> John Ardagh, *The New French Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 273. Ardagh is, on the whole, pessimistic about the future of French cuisine as is Jean-Paul Aron in the concluding chapter of *Le Mangeur du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1973). Because of my stress on the institutions which diffuse the *discours alimentaire* and criticize culinary competence, I am more optimistic, agreeing with La Reynière in *Le Monde*, 6–7 mai 1973, p. 19. At any rate cuisine continues to occupy the French more than others if we accept the results of a time-budget study of twelve countries: in 1965 (the date of the interviews) the French spent an average of 106 minutes a day *à table* as compared to their nearest competitors, the Belgians (104 minutes), and to Americans who averaged only 79 minutes a day (Alexander Szalai et al., eds., *The Use of Time: Daily Activities of Urban and Suburban Populations in Twelve Countries* [The Hague: Mouton, 1972]).

and even elite fashion magazines, the audience for which is primarily feminine. The magazines are "women's" magazines and newspapers generally relegate culinary concerns to the "Women's World" or some such section.

The second type of *discours alimentaire*, one especially prominent in France, is characteristically directed at the consumer instead of the cook and at a mixed rather than a single sex audience. This culinary criticism, in journals, in newspapers, in guidebooks, is the "conscience gastronomique" of French cuisine, and, like literary criticism, serves optimally to inform, to educate the consumer and to encourage the creator. These are the functions too of the prizes to chefs (Meilleur Ouvrier de France), the pronouncements of groups of dedicated consumers, from the Chevaliers du Tastevin, the Académie Rabelais and the appetizingly alliterative A.A.A.A. (known to the profane as the Association Amicale des Amateurs d'Andouillettes Authentiques).<sup>6</sup>

The *Guide Michelin* is no doubt the most famous (or infamous) instance of the "conscience gastronomique" at work. Ostensibly a guide for travelers, it is far more a guide for the gourmet. The gain or loss of a Michelin star is a momentous occasion, whose repercussions are financial but also devastating to the honor of the chef. Like Vatel almost three hundred years earlier, who impaled himself on his sword when the fish arrived late for a banquet given in honor of Louis XIV, in 1966 the owner of a Parisian restaurant which lost both of its Michelin stars in a single year committed suicide. When a three-star restaurant in the south was demoted to two stars, the owner received telegrams from incensed patrons ringing with expressions of sympathy ("de coeur avec vous . . .").

The prestige of the *Guide Michelin* is international, as international as French cuisine itself. Despite culinary pluralism, the place of French cuisine is not seriously contested, certainly not by the French, and not by many others, even those who most enjoy forays into exotic condiments, spices, and frozen stewed hippopotamus (*sic*). French cuisine has moved beyond France: instead of the brain drain, we might speak of the kitchen drain, which lures chefs to New York and London for salaries in line with their talent, which sends

<sup>6</sup> There are a number of prizes and academies which bring together literature and cuisine. The Académie Rabelais awards a barrel of Beaujolais for a novel; the Club des Cent gives 1000 F to "un ouvrage de bonne tenue littéraire" which illustrates and defends gastronomy; the Union Internationale Gastronomique des Journalistes et Ecrivains, in conjunction with FIPREGA (Fédération Internationale de la Presse Gastronomique et Vinicole) gives awards as well. Specialization has been carried further by the Grand Prix Littéraire des Vins du Périgord, de la Région de Bergerac "à la gloire des vins du Périgord" (sections française et occitane). Further, if there are *quarante fauteuils* at the Académie française, there are *dix couverts* laid at the table of the Académie Goncourt *chez Drouant* (*Guide des Prix Littéraires* [Paris: Cercle de la Librairie, 1965]). By way of contrast, the only prize related to culinary matters in *Literary and Library Prizes* (New York: R. R. Bowker and Co., 1970) was established by a commercial enterprise (R. French and Co.) for the best cookbook, thereby maintaining the orientation of the American culinary system toward the home cook. We should also note the numerous recipe contests sponsored by American food companies.



Raymond Olivier of the Grand Véfour to Tokyo, which prompts Maxim's to set up restaurants in Chicago and Tokyo, and which sends the products of Fauchon to New York, Chicago and beyond.

Cuisine is not all of France, but it is France, an important ingredient of the image the French like to project of themselves and their culture, at least if we are to believe the publicity "spot" destined for American television written by Brigitte Bardot for the Commissariat au Tourisme: "Pour moi, la France, c'est du bon vin et de la nourriture délicieuse. . . . Ce sont les petits bistrotts, les châteaux, les robes de grands couturiers, Paris et son peuple."<sup>7</sup>

Far from being of interest solely to those in search of the *dive bouteille* and appropriate accompaniments, cuisine reveals a good deal about the culture in which it is produced and consumed. The evolution of French cuisine, the development of a tradition, indeed of a myth, affords an opportunity to sort out the elements of this cultural product that are peculiar to a particular society from those dimensions which are international in scope. The social and economic transformation of post-Revolutionary France permitted the elaboration of a gastronomy, which, however, would not have been possible without the legacy of the pre-Revolutionary cuisine and its associations with the aristocracy. The same interaction between past and present is even more striking in contemporary France where international phenomena such as inflation, affluence, heterogeneous publics, modernization, create great pressure toward standardization. But change does not occur in a vacuum. French cuisine responds to the present by adapting the traditions bequeathed by past generations of chefs and consumers.<sup>8</sup> French cuisine in the twenty-first century will not be the cuisine we know today, but it will be distinct, and distinctly French. Cuisine is too important a part of French life, too greatly valued for it to be otherwise.

## UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO CIRCLE

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *L'Express*, 11-17 mars 1974, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> As a final footnote to the changes in French cuisine and in American attitudes toward food, two recent articles are instructive: Joseph Wechsberg, "La Nature des Choses" (Profile of chef Michel Guérard and discussion of his *cuisine-minceur*), *The New Yorker*, 28 July 1975, pp. 34-48; and the cover story on "Food: The New Wave" (featuring Paul Bocuse) in *Newsweek*, 11 August 1975, pp. 50-57. The publicity given to these developments points to both the centrality of cuisine in France and the new awareness thereof in the U.S.