France

Dining with the Doom Generation

On french television these days, a mayonnaise commercial shows a young couple organizing a potluck dinner in their suburban garden. "I asked everyone to bring something nice," says the young woman. As it turns out, everyone has brought a jar of mayonnaise, and the guests end up happily sitting down to a one-course mayonnaise dinner, which they scoop straight out of the jar with spoons. At the end of the meal, the hostess remembers she'd prepared a few carrot sticks, and she serves them for dessert.

The most surprising element in this slightly unappetizing scenario is the notion that the French would even consider serving raw carrots for dessert. What happened to all that "carrot sticks are for rabbits" rhetoric I used to hear when I moved to France as a child, eighteen years ago? Is the four-course French meal, and indeed, French cooking itself, really going down the drain?

In truth, it started going that way years ago. My generation was brought up by 1960s and '70s "pressure-cooker moms," working women heavily obsessed with blenders, choppers, and other time-saving devices, to whom pressure cookers were marketed as the keystone of women's lib. Under the leadership of depressing Françoise Bernard, best-selling author of *La Cuisine à l'Electricité*, *Les Recettes Faciles* and *300 Recettes* SEB (sponsored by a brand of pressure cookers),[1] a whole nation of women began dumbing down and speeding up traditional French dishes. By the 1980s, vans selling frozen foods were touring the countryside, honking their horns in the most remote village squares. Now every good-sized town has a supermarket entirely devoted to frozen dishes; you can compose a four-course meal there, starting with frozen snails and ending with a frozen charlotte, and that's where you'll meet the pressure-cooker moms' children, because none of them has a clue how to cook—or even what to cook.

And the emphasis is equally on *what*, as in "What's for dinner tonight? Mayonnaise." French food consumers today are best described as "slightly disoriented" to "completely bewildered." While we still like to think of ourselves as shopping at daily outdoor markets, eating lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, and making *blanquette de veau* on Sunday, most urban working families actually shop once a week in giant supermarkets (among the largest in the world), where they seem to lose control over their shopping carts. They toss in Harry's hamburger breads and out-of-season vegetables; they wince at the lingering memory of mad-cow disease yet pick up a few steaks nonetheless; they hesitate between marbled chocolate-apricot yogurt, anti-wrinkle vitamin yogurt, or individual servings of *clafoutis aux framboises*. The truth is that the French love gadget foods. At the checkout counter, idly assessing my neighbors' choices, my guilty childhood health-food instincts cry out: "Stop! Put all that junk back!"

But I am not alone in hearing those little voices. The positive side of the meat scares and the anguish over genetically modified crops is that the younger, urban generation is finally waking up to the existence of health food, organic fruit and vegetables, and even edible flowers. Let's take a walk down the aisles of Bioasis, my local organic-foods supermarket. Beautiful philosophy students on roller blades, art historians, and double-income executive families are peering at algae-flavored spaghetti, shoveling raw sugar into brown paper bags, picking up bottles of organic wine and champagne. This would still have been science fiction ten years ago, in the carrots-are-for-rabbits era. Still, when I bring home my purchases, my friends are a bit taken aback. "Pumpkin seeds?" they ask skeptically. "How did you find out about all this weird food anyway?" Another question comes up quite frequently: "What is tofu?"

Until very recently, vegetarian food was still considered suspicious and depressing—perhaps because French vegetarians still tend to be the unhip, macrobiotic type. "I would never put a foot in a vegetarian restaurant, they are so sad," is a common pronouncement. No *Vegetarian Epicure* here. In fact, nearly all vegetarian, vegetable-oriented, or health

Right: *Eating on the Edge of the Night, Nimes, France, 2002.*
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cookbooks you can buy in France are translated from English, as are a majority of Asian and Indian cookbooks. The French, it seems, just don't get it.

Which brings me to an important point. The French are not foodies, in the sense that they are not interested in food trends, and especially not in learning about foreign foods. Although their own time-consuming food traditions are evidently floundering, they aren't into finding out about Lebanese mulberry syrup, or even the multiple possibilities of fresh coriander. In the *Independent* a few months ago, Terry Durack complained that because food trends pass so quickly in Australia, his wife no longer allows him to make his favorite Thai green curry, claiming that it is "so last century."[2] Reading this, I paused: Thai green curry? I wish I could see statistics showing the percentage of French who have even heard of it.

So how does this fit together? Frozen *croque-monsieurs* and organic sesame butter, the refusal to change our cooking habits, and the fact that they are changing nonetheless? Well, it doesn't. And any individual's behavior towards food follows rules that are far from rational. Or rather, "inside people's heads, several different rationalities work simultaneously," as Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier, a sociologist who conducted a survey on supermarket shoppers, says. She explains that while shopping, our minds zap under the combined influence of emotions, symbols, personal taste, and economic logic.[3]

After a few months of spying on co-shoppers, interviewing friends and strangers, and reading for this article, my mind began to zap, too. Finally, my friend Thérèse and I decided in favor of the unscientific approach, and we had a very entertaining evening reviewing all the dinners we'd been invited to in the past five years. Our first conclusion was that we hardly ever get invited to dinner at all. Most of our thirty-year-old friends prefer to go out for a lot of drinks; they tend to feel edgy in confined, intimate spaces. Then we added up all the times we'd even had pleasant meals and came to a ratio of about one in ten. We decided that perhaps our generation is simply slow to learn cooking, as we spend nearly all of our energy trying to get jobs.

Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago, I was on the phone with my boyfriend, Thomas; he told me that Johan, who shares his apartment, was cooking "meat stuffing." "Do you mean stuffed vegetables?" I asked. "Well, not exactly. Just stuffing, I think: it seems to present itself as lots of little pieces." Later, discussing this article, he noted the fact that no one our age seems capable of managing a multicourse dinner. At best, they'll throw together noncommittal chicken breasts in *sauce au curry* and buy four bottles of wine. "What I miss is that no one ever makes desserts anymore," he said regretfully, adding, "I wish we could move them up to main-course position."

But at a deeper level, the interest in preparing food as a means of asserting personality and demonstrating social skills seems to be dying out. Or perhaps it never really existed: as food sociologist Jean-Pierre Poulain pointed out at a conference entitled "Eating Today," the role of cooking in France is supposed to be about passing down cultural heritage, not keeping up with the Joneses' dinner parties. This symbolic approach to food is accompanied by the belief that our cooking is still the best in the world: when I conducted a little survey among my acquaintances, this idea emerged as a general thought pattern, usually backed by an example involving some specific part of the duck. When pushed to their limits, my friends will admit: "Yes, all this American fast food we see everywhere is unbearable, there's certainly nothing like a nice organic foie gras."

French cooking is now at a turning point: fear of meat, guilt about losing our culture, and a lack of time and interest have left us in a sort of no-future zone where we'll eat just about anything, including ostrich and kangaroo. "The French are off the old stuff, but they aren't onto the new stuff yet," commented my American mother on the phone. "So they're having things like canned guacamole with Old El Paso corn chips for dinner."

This is probably a bit harsh. The point is that the French have yet to invent a new, urban, more international style of cooking that will revive their interest in food. Yet many people would find tragic, should it come about, the definitive loss of our beloved cream and wine emulsions, to be replaced by seaweed salad. My opinion—though it is not shared by many here—is, Who cares? The English and Americans are much better at French cooking than we are, having absorbed it—along with Italian cuisine—to such an extent that they know a lot more about it than we do. I read an amazing recipe for *pommes dauphines* in the *New York Times* food section recently. Well, no real French people ever make their own *pommes dauphines* anymore. In fact, we hardly ever have the frozen kind, either. They seem to have disappeared.

NOTES

1. Françoise Bernard, *300 Recettes SEB* (SEB, 1960), *Les Recettes Faciles* (Paris: Hachette, 1965), *La Cuisine à l'Electricité* (Paris: Hachette, 1967).

2. Terry Durack, "What's cooking ?", *The Independent*, 18 November 2000.

3. Cited in Jean-Michel Normand, "Du Cheval au Kangourou, l'Essor des Viandes Alternatives," *Le Monde*, 9 March 2001, my translation.