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978-0-521-82199-5 - A Revolution in Taste: The Rise of French Cuisine, 1650-1800

Susan Pinkard

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A REVOLUTION IN TASTE

Modern French habits of cooking, eating, and drinking were born in the ancien régime, radically breaking with culinary traditions that originated in antiquity and creating a new aesthetic. This new culinary culture saw food and wine as important links between human beings and nature. Authentic foodstuffs and simple preparations became the hallmarks of the modern style.

Susan Pinkard traces the roots and development of this culinary revolution to many different historical trends, including changes in material culture, social transformations, medical theory and practice, and the Enlightenment. Pinkard illuminates the complex cultural meaning of food in this history of the new French cooking from its origins in the 1650s through the emergence of *cuisine bourgeoise* and the original *nouvelle cuisine* in the decades before 1789.

This book also discusses the evolution of culinary techniques and includes historical recipes adapted for today's kitchens.

Susan Pinkard holds a master's degree and a Ph.D. in modern European history from the University of Chicago. Since 2005, she has been a full-time visiting member of the Department of History at Georgetown University. She spent most of her earlier career as a university administrator, serving as Associate Dean and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and as Senior Lecturer in History and Assistant Dean in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, Northwestern University.

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A Revolution in Taste

THE RISE OF FRENCH CUISINE,
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Georgetown University



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Preface and Acknowledgments

The history of cuisine is full of legends, and some of the evergreens among them relate directly to the subject of this book. Whenever I mention that I write about the rise of modern French habits of cooking, eating, and drinking, someone always responds with one or more of the following views:

Fine cuisine was introduced to France by the Florentine chefs in the suite of Catherine de' Medici, who married the future Henry II in 1533. In other words, the Italians taught the French how to cook.

The historical role of spices and sauces was to disguise inferior ingredients, especially meat that was rotting or of otherwise poor quality.

Dom Pérignon, a Benedictine monk, invented sparkling champagne. Foods introduced from the Americas quickly transformed the European diet in the century after 1492.

All of these legends turn out to be just that – beliefs unfounded in fact. The myth that *haute cuisine* was an Italian invention was first articulated in the eighteenth century in the context of polemics about luxury and artifice, which also gave rise to the belief that spicy seasonings and sauces functioned as masks for corruption. (Catherine de' Medici enjoyed a reputation for gluttony and lavish entertaining during her lifetime, but the food served in her household continued a culinary style that had been established at the French court in the late Middle Ages.) Spices are ineffective as preservatives (whereas salting, drying, and pickling are efficient), and in any case they were so expensive in medieval and early modern times that anyone who could afford spices in quantity could easily afford to buy meat and fish of the best quality. Self-carbonated champagne that effervesced in the glass was an unintended consequence of bottling wine for storage, a new technology in the seventeenth century. The American crops that ultimately had the greatest impact on the European diet and cooking (potatoes, tomatoes, and, to some extent, maize) were relatively slow to be accepted as foods for

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humans. The items that spread rapidly, such as the chili pepper, the turkey, and New World beans and squash, did so precisely because they fit into the culinary patterns that Renaissance Europe inherited from the Middle Ages.

These common misunderstandings raise the question of what *did* account for the fundamental shift in ingredients, aesthetics, and techniques that revolutionized French – or, more precisely, Parisian – cooking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Around 1600, the food served on the tables of the elite still reflected the traditions of the pan-European medieval kitchen, the key elements of which merged influences from Roman, Germanic, and Arab sources. The distinction between sweet and savory, so fundamental to modern French taste, did not exist. Sauces for meat or fish typically combined sugar, honey, or other sweet ingredients with sour ones, such as vinegar or citrus juices, and aromatic spices, including cinnamon, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, coriander, pepper, and saffron. Cooks strove to produce dishes that fused many layers of flavor into a single, unitary whole, rendering individual ingredients unidentifiable to even sensitive palates. The techniques, equipment, and many of the seasonings used to achieve these results had been part of European practice since antiquity or dated, at the latest, from the spread of Muslim influence in the High Middle Ages.

By 1700, this ancient way of doing things had all but disappeared from the kitchens of the nobility and aspiring Parisian bourgeoisie, displaced by what one of its progenitors called “the art of cooking foods delicately.” This meant discarding seasonings and techniques that tended to obscure the natural taste and texture of principal ingredients. Mild garden herbs replaced aromatic spices; acidic or sweet-sour sauces were jettisoned in favor of subtle, silky ones rich in butter and cream (fats tend to magnify the flavor of the foods they accompany); roasted meats were sauced with their own deglazed juices; vegetables, which had traditionally been boiled into mush, were now served “half cooked,” that is, still green and slightly crisp to the tooth. Sugar, which was more plentiful and cheaper than ever (thanks to plantations in the Americas), was now segregated into the dessert course or was consumed between meals in the newly fashionable colonial drinks (coffee, tea, and chocolate) and the confections served with them. In the course of a century, all the old culinary rules of thumb had been discarded by Parisian chefs, and the new ones adopted in their place form the foundation of French cooking – and much of modern European and American cooking – as we know it today. Whereas medieval culinary practice privileged sharp contrasts of flavor and texture, the new cooking stressed harmonious combinations of natural flavors. “Make it simple” and “let things taste of what they are” are famous dictums of the twentieth-century gastronome

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Curnonsky; the aesthetic they express came into its own in the kitchens of the ancien régime.

Given the deep cultural roots and staying power of the medieval culinary tradition – not to mention the fundamental human preference for eating foods that are familiar from an early age – an interesting historical question is, how and why did traditional cuisine lose its place in the daily lives of Europeans (starting with the French) and get replaced with a new approach to cooking that was (and is) in many respects its antithesis? That this transformation took place in a relatively short period of time (three generations, more or less) in a pre-industrial society makes it all the more remarkable. A sufficient answer, I would argue, would necessarily involve both the history of material culture and the social history of ideas.

The chapters that follow touch on a wide range of subjects, from demographic and economic developments to changes in medical theory and from the history of horticulture to Rousseau's ideas about the virtue of simplicity. There is much analysis of recipes, culinary techniques, and equipment, but also of the social context in which these evolved. The ancien régime was an era in which the diets of the rich and poor became even more sharply differentiated than had previously been the case. Among the elites, refinement came to count, along with high birth, as essential to a noble way of life, and a household's cuisine functioned as a marker of distinction for the upwardly mobile as well as the established aristocracy. The century and a half that followed the emergence of delicate cooking in the 1650s was characterized by increasingly radical waves of desire to live in a manner that appeared to be ever closer to nature – simpler, more authentic, less artificial. The historical moment that created the pomp of Versailles also longed for its opposite, a world without ceremony, in which informal manners, sincerity, and friendship ruled. These ideas about what constituted the good life inevitably affected the way people wanted to eat and drink, as well as their behavior at the table. This desire to experience the wonderful variety of the natural world and to live in harmony with it was articulated with increasing clarity and force as the age of Louis XIV gave way to the Enlightenment, and, perhaps more than any other single factor, it confirmed the preference for authentic tastes and simple presentations embodied in the delicate style and its eighteenth-century descendant, the self-described (and original) *nouvelle cuisine*.

I have tried to tell this complex tale succinctly, while presenting details and examples that illuminate the narrative as a whole. However, some readers may wish to focus on sections of the book that address their particular interests. For example, readers who want to learn about historical recipes and culinary techniques will find most of this material concentrated

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in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 (specifically the sections “Cuisine as a Systematic Art” and “French Cooking in England in the Age of Massialot”), Chapter 6 (“*Nouvelle Cuisine*, circa 1740” and “*Cuisine Nouvelle, Cuisine Bourgeoise*”), and the Appendix. For the social milieu of Paris high society and the royal court in relationship to food and dining, see Chapter 3 (“Feeding Bourbon Paris,” “A New Standard of Luxury,” and “Dining Without Ceremony”) and Chapter 5 (“Delicate Cooking Becomes French” and “Cooking for *la Cour et la Ville*”). The interplay between elite cuisine and the food of the poor is explored in Chapter 2 (“Divergent Diets of Rich and Poor”) and Chapter 6 (“Anti-Cuisines”). Developments in horticulture and gardening are discussed in Chapter 2 (“Vegetable Renaissance”) and Chapter 3 (“Capturing the Variety of Nature” and “A New Standard of Luxury”). Diet, medicine, and cooking are addressed in Chapter 1 (“Hippocratic Medicine and Dietetics”), Chapter 3 (“The Revolution in Medicine”), and Chapter 6 (“A New Science of Dietetics”). The development of modern taste, which privileges ideas of simplicity and authenticity, is treated in Chapter 3 (“Capturing the Variety of Nature” and “A New Standard of Luxury”), and Chapters 4–7.

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