

Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760

Review Number:

1442

Publish date:

Thursday, 27 June, 2013

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ISBN:

9780226768861

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£31.50

Pages:

368pp.

Publisher:

University of Chicago Press

Publisher url:

<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/E/bo13412962.html>

Place of Publication:

Chicago, IL

Reviewer:

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Over 40 years ago, Robert Darnton proposed to evaluate the Enlightenment from its authors' perspectives. After all, he observed, they were 'men of flesh and blood, who wanted to fill their bellies, house their families, and make their way in the world'.⁽¹⁾ But with what did they fill their bellies, and when, and how much? And what significance did these 'enlightened' authors give to the act of eating or preparing food? Did they perceive that enlightenment affected eating, or vice versa? On these matters, Darnton remained mute. The task falls to E. C. Spary, who promises to reveal how the high ideals of Enlightenment materialized in the sciences and commerce dedicated to food production, preparation, and digestion. Do not look for recipes here – instead, the author establishes that her subject is 'the public construction of knowledgeable expertise' regarding food (p. 4). She investigates who became food experts in Paris during the 18th century, and what were their claims to authority.

We 21st-century moderns have witnessed a similar transformation in food authority in the past generation. The expansion of celebrity chefs' influence through television shows, cookbooks, magazines and product endorsements means they vie for authority over what we eat and in what quantities with medical doctors, nutritionists, and public policy analysts. Recently, the Food Network's reigning queen of southern American cuisine, Paula Deen made a shame-faced admission that she had been diagnosed with type-two diabetes, requiring her to abandon her signature sugar- and butter-laden diet for Greek yogurt and unsweetened tea. In the United Kingdom, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has taken on the monumental task of reforming school

lunches and initiating fast-food devotees into the wonders of home-cooked meals with his *Food Revolution* initiative, television show, and cookbook. Both Deen and Oliver contribute to a culinary public sphere crowded with experts extolling contradictory advice that seems to change daily: soy prevents cancer – eat more tofu! No, soy disrupts hormones – don't eat tofu! It's enough to make one wish for simpler days, but *Eating the Enlightenment* reminds us that those simpler days likely never existed.

What experts shaped enlightened eating in the 18th century? Spary introduces us to physicians, chemists, university faculty, cookbook authors, guild masters, theologians, renowned hosts and diners, all of whom made claims to alimentary expertise. However, over the course of this century, some professions won that authority, while others lost ground. While Spary provides illuminating detail on contemporary debates, it is sometimes difficult to see the consequences of the contests that she describes. The book's six substantive chapters address four alimentary sites: digestion, coffee, liqueurs, and diet. This reviewer would have appreciated a brief discussion of why these particular topics provide such a good entry into enlightened eating. Why digestion but not mastication or excretion? Why coffee, not chocolate? Why liqueurs, not wine? Lacking the author's rationale, the choices can seem random and only tangentially related to each other. For many readers, reading this book may feel like entering in the middle of a conversation. Spary assumes a high degree of familiarity with key figures and institutions. It will come as a relief to experts in these fields, no doubt, to sidestep some of the predictable tales of 18th-century medicine or French culinary lore. But it may put off many interested amateurs, as the text assumes a wide-ranging knowledge of theology, economic theory, and political philosophy.

Spary situates this research at the intersection of several historiographical fields. First, it contributes to book history, a field that has sought to ground accounts of European Enlightenment in the more mundane realities of producing and circulating texts. Second, it references the history of consumption, which has highlighted a 'consumer revolution' in the urban centers of early modern Europe. Third, Spary participates in recent trends in the history of science. Following the lead of such scholars as Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, she combats a 'great man' approach to the history of science by exploring how networks of individuals from diverse backgrounds created scientific knowledge through decades of debate. Applying Bruno Latour's powerful critique of the scientific method to food reveals how '[f]ood practices, like scientific truth claims, can become 'black-boxed' within cultures and thereby hard to reverse' (p. 296). Recovering 18th-century alimentary debates promises to open the box, enabling us to imagine other possible truths created by alternative authorities. Lastly, Spary engages with French culinary history, rooting culinary transformations in broader social and intellectual movements. The research is truly comprehensive, resulting in a scholarly apparatus that is a testament to the author's interdisciplinarity and rigor.

Early 18th-century debates over digestion mobilized some of the leading lights of the Parisian medical faculty to develop arguments of how the human body took nourishment from food. These physiological models then provided the foundation for ideals of consumption that influenced economic, political, and theological theories. Spary contrasts the dominant chemical account against a compelling new hydraulic model of digestion. Iatrochemical models of the human body 'postulated the existence of multiple ferments in the body, controlling the various stages of digestion in the stomach, intestines, and bloodstream' and dominated in the early years of the 18th century (p. 21). In contrast, the hydraulic account of trituration 'portrayed the body as a continuous network of pulsating vessels' (p. 29). Motion characterized this explanation of bodily functions. Food moving through the digestive tract became chyle, chyle moved into the blood, 'and blood into a subtle vapor able to penetrate the brain substance' (p. 29). These different accounts postulated very different results from food choices, and imagined very different sources of indigestion. However, digestion did not simply concern the body. Spary demonstrates how authors drew moral, social, and political conclusions from their proposals.

For example, both iatrochemical and triturationist models investigated how the 'natural laws' presumed to govern digestion accorded with Catholic dietary law. In 1709, the physician Philippe Hecquet relied on a triturationist account of digestion to argue that the lean foods (no meat or animal fats) required by Catholic dietary law on Fridays and during Lent were ideally suited to nourishment of the human machine. Spary observes that Hecquet, 'presented lean foods and vegetarianism as elements of a great reformation of

Catholic lifestyles, a return to an original purity of soul and body' (p. 25). Spary finds convincing evidence linking Hecquet to Jansenist circles that supported the general reform of French Catholicism conceived of as a return to early Christian simplicity and piety. Extending this critique from the individual to the social, Hecquet's text also can be read as a condemnation of French elites' consumption of luxury goods and exotic produce.

Nicolas Andry de Boisregard attacked Hecquet's thesis on both physiological and theological grounds. The iatrochemical account of digestion imagined that lean foods – such as beans, grains, and fibrous vegetables – increased the bad ferments within the digestive system. There could be no doubt, argued Andry, that the period of Lent weakened the body and disordered its usual ferments. But this was the point, theologically speaking. Spary notes that Andry 'argued that God had ordained the Lenten period precisely in order to humble the body by weakening it' (p. 31). Spary links Andry with the Molinists, those Catholics who advocated a more moderate reform of the Church by stressing 'good works and self-denial' rather than the Jansenists' emphasis on individual piety and salvation through faith (p. 24). Somewhat paradoxically within the 'Most Christian' French king's domains, rigorous adherence to Catholic dietary law became entwined with opposition politics through the 1750s.

Spary next evaluates debates over coffee as a key site in the production of Enlightened knowledge. Indeed, what would a history of the Enlightenment be without reference to coffee? Spary digs past the facile pleasantries regarding how many cups Voltaire swilled to survey the economic and cultural transformations that opened French society up to this exotic beverage. Coffee entered France in the 17th century and symbolized the new exclusive trade agreements negotiated between Louis XIV and the Ottoman Empire. The French extended cultivation of coffee to their American colonies, resulting in cheaper beans perceived as inferior to the Arabica varieties available through Ottoman trade. As a result, over the course of 50 years coffee went from an exotic luxury comestible to a relatively cheap beverage accessible to nearly everyone within the urban marketplace.

Coffee required specialized equipment to optimally roast, grind, and filter the beans for consumption, resulting in the proliferation of cafés throughout European capitals. The development of cafés and café culture has featured prominently in Enlightenment historiography, particularly since the publication of Jurgen Habermas's thesis establishing the coffeehouse alongside salons, academies, and Freemason lodges as sites of the 18th-century public sphere.⁽²⁾ Spary complements this existing scholarship, adding information about the incorporation of the *limonadiers* guild in Paris, the master lemonade distillers who ran cafés throughout the 18th century. She reviews the connections between specific cafés and social/intellectual circles, investigating how café owners cultivated their learned patrons, and relied on intellectual reputations to enhance business. However, many café-goers dismissed cafés as sites of learning – these public sites admitted 'Nobles & Commoners, well-formed & flat-faced Adolescents, wits & fools' without distinction, observed one contemporary (p. 116). Sceptics argued that although literary debates might be rehearsed in the 'performative space' of the café, no genuine advances in knowledge occurred there. Spary presents convincing evidence from three café owners whose own participation in the Republic of Letters was fraught with presumed conflicts of interest between art and science on the one hand, and commerce on the other hand. This fundamentally challenges a central tenet of the Habermasian thesis. In both French cafés and British coffeehouses, contemporaries perceived that the 'public' and commercial nature of these sites actually limited the possibilities for rational-critical discourse.

Scientific debates return to the forefront of analysis in a chapter dedicated to distillation. Contemporary advances in chemical theory transformed distillation processes and commercial distillers represented their work as participating in a bold new science. The *limonadiers*' guild sold a wide range of hot and cold beverages in addition to coffee in their cafés, including lemonade, chocolate, cider, brandy, and ices. House-prepared liqueurs proved to be very popular among consumers, and represented the master limonadier's expertise in distillation, as well as human ingenuity in making use of Nature's bounty. Spary juxtaposes contemporary distillation manuals with advertisements, and treatises in chemistry to advance her argument that liqueurs 'became the focus of debates over what it meant to be enlightened' (p. 193). Part of this argument is semantic – the term *esprit* referred to both distilled spirits as well as mental spirit or wit – and

contemporaries made much of the relationship between the two. But mostly, these sources testify to the extensive reach of the 18th-century 'chemical revolution' into daily life in European cities. Advances in chemistry promised to transform food, drink, and medicine immediately and the master distillers provided access to these new products.

Finally, Spary turns to a wide array of sources to establish the contours of 18th-century debates on diet. She investigates 'how the models of learning, expertise, and embodiment expressed in cuisine and alimentary chemistry related to attempts to craft philosophical identity between the 1730s and the 1750s' (p. 195). What was the relationship between mind and body? What diet would best support cultivation of the mind and support the pursuit of reason? She surveys cookbooks, correspondence, and contemporary essays to establish some important parameters of the philosophical diet. Coffee, naturally, figured prominently, but so too did an ideal of rational moderation. What this meant provided fodder for decades of debate.

Delving into the correspondence of the Swiss physicians Tronchin and Tissot to their illustrious patients, Spary finds evidence for how medical ideals translated into dietary advice for men and women of letters. This population faced particular challenges, combining lack of exercise with anti-authoritarian attitudes, and regular rich food and drink at the tables of elite patrons. Indigestion was the writer's central ailment as a result. Both Tissot and Tronchin advised their patients to cut down on coffee consumption, increase milk consumption, and to generally adopt a policy of alimentary abstinence. Spary terms this an 'impoverished image of Nature' that warned against any food beyond the most basic necessities (p. 252). Such recommendations revealed broader political and religious agendas, Spary argues, linking the abstemious diets to Protestant theology and republican politics. However, the links between physiology and politics, so convincingly established in the digestion debate, remain circumstantial in this chapter. Moreover, Spary convincingly established that an abstemious diet could point to Catholic reformist sentiments and anti-absolutist politics.

Over the course of the 18th century, medical advice replaced religious dietary law for men and women of letters. This signals a monumental shift in French society, begging the question of urban secularism so directly addressed by the recent work of Reynald Abad and Stephane Van Damme. This reviewer would have welcomed more direct analysis of this shift, which surely had profound consequences for what was eaten, when and in what quantities. Did an enlightened eater consider Catholic dietary law when dining, or dismiss it as mere superstition?

Spary's admirable research into the history of food sciences opens many avenues for future inquiry. This reader is particularly curious to determine if Spary's research enhances or undermines the dominant historiography advancing French culinary exceptionalism. Was this story of enlightened eating unique to Paris? To what degree did alimentary authorities shift in Vienna, Berlin, London or Philadelphia during the 18th century? The Republic of Letters was a transnational phenomenon, and very few discoveries remained within national boundaries thanks to correspondence and publication networks. Did trituration fare better in Moscow than in Paris? Did Venetian or Roman artists and intellectuals embrace coffee with the same fervor as their French counterparts, and did they draw similar conclusions about the political significance of meat consumption during Lent? Spary has charted a powerful methodology for reexamining the history of food and foodways that will have long lasting consequences throughout the field.

After surveying 18th-century debates over digestion, coffee, taste, and diet, Spary concludes that '[u]ltimately, this book is less concerned with how enlightened eaters consumed food than with how they stomach learning' (p. 295). Physicians, pharmacists, chemists and even cooks and café keepers struggled to establish authority over new alimentary knowledge and new modes of knowledge production. Spary explains that her own use of the term 'enlightenment' derives from 18th-century usage in which it signalled less 'membership of a coherent intellectual movement, but rather indicated that a person had publicly acknowledged expertise in some domain of knowledge' (p. 3). This definition throws the doors open, considering Voltaire and Rousseau's regimens alongside those championed by their physicians and their cooks. All who participated in the production and consumption of food and drink in 18th-century Paris, and who self-consciously referenced the novelty of their methods or the enlightenment of their practice, figure in

this history of enlightened eating.

Notes

1. Robert Darnton, 'The High Enlightenment and the low-life of literature in pre-Revolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 51 (May 1971), 81–115, 82.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962; English ed., London, 1989).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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