

Defining Culinary Authority: the Transformation of Cooking in France, 1650-1830

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In 18th- and 19th-century France, notions of gastronomic taste and fine dining undoubtedly developed in aristocratic, privileged, and wealthy social spheres. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the salons, restaurants of the Palais-Royal, and dining societies. However, this spatial exclusivity itself did not dictate the culinary trends and aesthetics of the time. Jennifer J. Davis shifts the focus of culinary authority away from the affluent diners and onto the cooks and their books which helped to define French gastronomy. As a result of her meticulous scholarship on guilds and authorship, she reveals the great extent to which culinary debates emerged from the growing prominence and fame of chefs in a more public space, rather than at the court. With numerous figures on the 18th-century readership of cookbooks, Davis not merely highlights the growing obsession for reading about cooking, but also suggests that the celebrity chefs of the 19th-century, like Marie-Antoine Carême, were indebted to the works of Menon, François Marin, and Vincent La Chapelle.

Appropriately entitled 'Taste in the kitchen', the introduction emphasizes that the chefs themselves initiated the transformation of cooking into an art. This evolution was not simply the work of a few aristocrats. Davis therefore poses a critical question: Who were these cooks and what was their relationship with the marketplace at large? In addition to hosting meals, caterers and merchants provided readymade dishes to city dwellers, many of whom did not have their own kitchens. Citing Nicholas de Blégny's *Handy Book of Parisian Addresses* (1692), Davis points out that caterers served the working classes in cabarets, while they also provided dishes to the elite, everything from sauces and aspics to roasts and meat pies. During the 18th century, eating in public was on the rise. As domestic servants began to earn a wage rather than room and board, they would venture into eating establishments and dine among soldiers and other day laborers. The

clientele consisted mostly of men, but women were an essential part of food production in the guilds. Throughout this book, Davis indicates the contribution of women as cooks and artisans, and thus ‘provides a corrective to the dominant narrative that prioritizes the genius of male chefs as the driving force of French cuisine’ (p. 11). In Davis’s work, the lack of female cookbook writers (with the exception of Marie-Armande-Jeanne Gacon-Dufour) is not an oversight, but rather a consequence of the marginalization of women that she carefully lays out. While gender issues remain a palpable leitmotif, the most crucial and thought-provoking aspect of the study revolves around social and aesthetic issues pertaining to taste.

Davis begins by examining the changing culinary discourse on the artificial and the natural. During the 17th century, the ability to disguise foods represented skill and creativity. It also had a religious function. Chefs disguised fish as meat during fast days. ‘*Disguise* signified a cook’s skill, taste, and economy, as well as his role in insulating consumers from the base origins of their meals’ (p. 22). By 1674, L.S.R.’s *L’Art de bien traiter* moved the aesthetic emphasis away from artifice and quantity and instead toward a more refined simplicity. *Natural cuisine* indicated two different types of cooking. It referred to the straightforward preparation of local ingredients. However, at the same time, this *nouvelle cuisine* involved complex culinary techniques that were based on scientific principles, which were in agreement with the laws of nature. ‘Practitioners of natural cuisine praised simplicity and transparency in alimentary preparations’ (p. 39). Davis provides an intriguing cultural history, explaining how the chefs of 18th-century aristocrats used their high culinary rank to publish cook books that would revamp and redefine French gastronomy. In *Le cuisinier moderne* (1735), Vincent La Chapelle applies medical theories regarding health to his new cooking principles, advancing a link between cooks, doctors, and scientists. Like La Chapelle, François Marin raises the status of cooks by associating them with the medical field. At the end of this section, Davis cleverly situates the chefs’ focus on nature within a larger history on aesthetics by drawing from the Enlightenment’s debates on the artistic ideal of the natural, in particular Denis Diderot’s *Salon de 1767*.

Studying the history of culinary taste involves seriously considering the agents responsible for disseminating its codes. Accordingly, it is important to uncover the educational and judiciary pieces of the political structure that contributed to the development of gastronomy as a critical cultural field in France. The next piece of this book examines the complex training of chefs during the 17th and 18th centuries in aristocratic homes and through the guild system. Rather than just condemning the guilds’ economically oppressive regulatory organization, Davis carefully reveals the social characteristics of its workers – their generational identity, class, and gender – by making sense of anecdotes from police reports and by analyzing apprenticeship contracts. The culinary trade included men from both the city and country who went to Paris for training. Hierarchies within guilds were based on age, experience, and also sex. Unlike male laborers, women were subject to a series of unjust rules that were financially prohibitive. For instance, widows were not allowed to have apprentices. Furthermore, 18th-century police reports indicate that widows who remarried were investigated by pastry cook officials for continuing to practice catering. If they remarried, they would be expected to withdraw from their business activities. Not surprisingly, the culinary guilds were comprised mostly of men. For instance: ‘Of the eighty-nine mastership examinations conserved in Rouen, only one is that of a woman’ (p. 62). Despite its sexism and mistreatment of apprentices, the guilds, unlike elite kitchens, provided an education in all facets of the trade.

The organization of guilds certainly represented a useful governing body that influenced culinary taste, and one that helped to ensure public health. Nonetheless, when compared to cookbook authors, they were less effective in putting forth and controlling new aesthetic standards in the kitchen. ‘The cookbook author was simultaneously creator, instructor, and judge of the culinary arts’ (p. 72). Rather than attribute this culinary authority to the relationship between cooks and their aristocratic employers, Davis points out the link between chefs and the growing public sphere. Throughout the 18th century cooks were increasingly interested in issues that would address the culinary field at large, instead of writing for the elite. At the same time, they were outlining their own tastes based on their own experiences. By studying the changing rhetoric and by investigating book sales and reviews, Davis examines this developing authorship and democratic evolution. The chef Menon appears at the core of this transition. In his *Nouveau traité de la cuisine* (1739), he declares that he wrote the cookbook to help him remember certain recipes of his own. In other words, it’s

an *aide-mémoire* written for himself, and not for an elite patron (p. 75). Moreover, Menon's *La Science du maître d'hôtel cuisinier* (1749) proposed a ground-breaking view of the culinary arts as an extension of the arts and sciences. At the same time, he introduced core Enlightenment ideals into modern cuisine, namely scientific progress and the importance of reason.

For the purposes of this study, Menon's *La cuisine bourgeoise* (1746) is the most significant publication, showing both the popularity of cookbook reading and the interest in less extravagant cooking. It highlights simple domestic cuisine that would have been prepared by women, and 'newspaper reviews of later editions referred to it as a text with universal appeal' (p. 79). Whereas previous scholars, such as Susan Pinkard and Barbara Wheaton, associated the term 'bourgeoise' in this book's title with middle-class cooking and a 'conscious rejection of aristocratic luxury', Davis reveals that the word 'bourgeois' connotes city dwellers (p. 79). During the 17th and 18th centuries, it was used to describe specifically the urban elite. Furthermore, she argues that the emphasis on simplicity and naturalness in *La cuisine bourgeoise* had become key expressions of aristocratic cooking. The conclusion drawn from this study should be eye-opening for food historians. First of all, it rejects the notion that Menon's book represents a decisive split between middle-class and aristocratic cuisine. In addition, her argument supports the belief that in France the culinary arts were conceived in an urban environment and for city inhabitants.

Regardless of the urban-rural divide, police activity and the regulation of food production prove that cuisine had become a national concern. The pastry cooks' guild policed trading boundaries, because they viewed themselves as looking out for the social good. For instance, when it came to cooking utensils, copper pots and pans were discovered to cause a poisonous verdigris. The tin from the inside of the vessel occasionally melted and had to be reapplied. As a result of an increasing paranoia surrounding the toxic corrosion, the caterer's guild conducted greater surveillance of merchants' kitchens. The guilds also attempted to enforce Catholic dietary rules. Pregnant women and those who were sick were exempt from laws against eating meat during Lent. Davis reveals however that many people began to ignore those laws for reasons of 'personal health and individual taste' (p. 100). Her research shows that eating meat during Lent became fashionable and indicated a sense of cosmopolitanism: 'Elite French men and women prided themselves on their cosmopolitan perspective that acknowledged the realities of religious differences in their world' (p. 100). Indeed, it's by demonstrating the large extent to which people disobeyed the guilds' rules that Davis shows how gastronomy developed from the public sphere. By 1776, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, the finance minister, put an end to the guild system, which he viewed as an impediment to free labor. Turgot's Royal Edict for the Suppression of the Guilds helped to encourage the growth of a commercial public sphere. The dissolution of the guilds thereby transferred culinary judgment to consumers.

Studying the sociopolitical effects of liberalizing the market, the last two chapters examine culinary authority in post-revolutionary France. Without the guilds to ensure culinary training and regulate food quality, gastronomes – men of letters – 'sought to enforce new norms of good taste, social order, and effective regulation within the liberal market' (p. 113). In early 19th-century France, gastronomic discourse shifted from cooks to educated connoisseurs of eating. The *Dîners du Vaudeville*, a dining club which first met in August 1796, provided a structure for men, most of whom were vaudeville playwrights (Piis, Radet and Deschamps), to meet regularly and critique food. Among Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Julia Csergo, Davis is one of the few scholars to rightly highlight the significance of such dining societies. In France's culinary history, they represent the missing link between the feminine space of the salon and the masculine domain of the restaurant. Furthermore, they indicate the spatial transition in fine dining from the private to public sphere. Ferguson points out that although they were private gatherings, they were located in more open spaces. In her words: 'Even the eating societies that served as important points of culinary encounter met in restaurants where gastronomy was not simply on view but open to all corners'.⁽¹⁾ Davis expands upon previous scholarship by identifying its links to gastronomic literature. In 1805, members of the *Dîners du Vaudeville* created a new group called *Le Caveau Moderne*, which published one of the first food journals, the *Journal des gourmands et des belles*. Davis's scholarship on dining societies makes me wonder to what degree 'culinary authority' developed out of a socially closed-off space. Concerning the years leading up to the restaurant's cultural domination in Paris, how do we make sense of the culinary ethics of

exclusion and inclusion? The history of the Société du Caveau – the formation of cabaret-like dining and singing clubs – shows that the words ‘member-only’ do not necessarily connote aristocratic elitism. Indeed, who is being excluded? And, what does this say about its sociopolitical objectives? After all, those dining clubs have their roots in the Société des Dîners du Caveau, conceived by Crébillon fils, Alexis Piron, and Charles Collé in 1733. Existing simultaneously with the renowned salons and *grands soupers* of Paris, those 18th-century predecessors displaced the cultural sphere of the *homme de lettres*, from the symbolically rich realm of *bienséance* to the socially inferior public space of *traiteurs*, followed by restaurateurs.

In addition to the aforementioned dining societies, the modern-day journalistic genre of food and restaurant reviews developed as a means to guide consumers in post-guild Paris. Grimod de La Reynière’s eight volumes of the *Almanach des Gourmands* represents the first example of such food criticism and ‘must be placed within this context of reformed labor laws and lax surveillance of culinary markets’ (p. 120). Previously, food historians, like Rebecca Spang, sidelined Grimod as a reactionary anomaly and an apolitical eccentric. This oversight however says more about 20th-century scholarship than 19th-century gastronomy. Davis, on the other hand, is one of the first historians to provide an in-depth analysis of his reviews, closely examining the influence of the food critic in the commercial marketplace. Food writer gastronomes helped popularize eating establishments, and chefs in turn paid tribute by dedicating cookbooks to them. Such is the case with André Viard’s *Le cuisinier imperial*, published in 1806. At the same time, there were chefs, like Antoine Beauvilliers, who protested the glorification of the food critic. A throwback to Old Regime traditions, Beauvilliers dedicated *L’art du cuisinier* to the marquis de la Voppalière. Within this typically masculine genre, female cookbook author Marie-Armande-Jeanne Gacon-Dufour dealt with cooking in a manual on household economy, *Mauel complet de la maîtresse de maison*. Evoking earlier debates on the artifice and the natural, her writings speak to the distaste for elaborate cooking.

Toward the end of the section on early 19th-century food writing, Davis situates Brillat-Savarin in the gastronomic field as the ‘scientific gastronome’ (p. 138). She describes him as a defender of women, in comparison to Grimod who denigrates women by objectifying them as food. However, this assessment on Grimod’s view of women is not entirely convincing, in light of her previous statements in which she reveals his praising of women in food establishments. In addition, it’s not entirely clear why Grimod is depicted as patriarchal or conservative. In his positive review of the Marmite Perpetuelle, what makes his praises of culinary tradition necessarily patriarchal? It would seem that when compared to 18th-century guilds, Grimod was much more in favor of women’s culinary involvement. True, Grimod’s *Almanach* is full of analogies between women and good food. Yet, by establishing correspondences between these different accounts and contextualizing them, it becomes clear that Grimod’s favoring of food over women exposes on the one hand a scandalous rejection of sexual desire; hence a denial of nature that is hardly conservative. And, it also points out his fascination with feminine appeal and libertine strategies of love. We cannot therefore dismiss his preference for food as a rejection of the feminine and misogyny; for it is in this comparison that he reveals the extent to which gastronomic discourse emerged from an 18th-century aristocratic culture of seduction.

In the last chapter, Davis reveals why and how cooks in the early 19th century attempted to legitimize their authority through scientific endeavors. Napoleon Bonaparte elevated the status of doctors and academic scientists by funding their research. Also, the Société d’encouragement pour l’industrie nationale offered research opportunities for food artisans who worked with scientists to advance French industry. Davis states:

This association invested heavily in three diffuse projects that eventually infused the most basic culinary processes with scientific awareness: new methods of food preservation to benefit the nation’s armies and navies, new methods of stock preparation to sustain the nation’s poor, and new methods of extracting gelatin from bones to improve hospital and military diets at little added expense (p. 143).

Thanks to this government sponsorship, Nicolas Appert was able to perfect his technique of preserving foods

in glass jars, winning him first prize in the Société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale's 1809 competition. Davis's work is innovative in using a variety of sources – records, cookbooks, and theater – to demonstrate the complex gendered dynamics brought about by the high ranking of scientists in the kitchen. The chapter begins by referencing the 1803 legislation banning women from practicing medicine and receiving a scientific education. Associating men with medicine and science, hospitals even believed that male chefs provided more healthful and efficient meals. Davis references *Le cuisinier de Buffon*, a vaudeville comedy from 1823 that pokes fun at the naturalist who hires a male chef to oversee his female cook, simply because he is hosting scholars. Thankfully this association was just temporary: 'Cooks' invocation of scientific authority was a project that was never fully accepted or achieved' (p. 165). That said, the relegating of women to simple domestic cooking continues to play out in 21st-century France where Anne-Sophie Pic remains the only three-starred Michelin chef. Davis brings our attention to the fact that if men were responsible for developing French gastronomy, it was partly because women were constantly deprived of the same chances.

Food scholars sometimes forget that the dining table is the site of interdisciplinarity, and as such, studying it demands various approaches. *Defining Culinary Authority* represents a major contribution to the field of culinary history, precisely because it reminds us of the multifaceted influences on culinary aesthetics. Davis reveals the connections between science, literature, and cuisine by putting together and exploring different types of documents. Her work corrects several misconceptions about key figures and developments in gastronomic history, and it will prove to be a tremendous resource to scholars and cultural historians in the years to come.

Notes

1. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'A cultural field in the making', *French Food: On the Table On the Page and in French Culture* (Abingdon, 2001), pp. 5–51, 13.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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