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Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934-1961

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Julia Childs is a familiar figure to both historians of food, and those who study shifting discourses of domesticity in the USA. Her book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, written in collaboration with Simone Beck (known as Simca) and to a lesser extent Louisette Bertholle, was immediately successful when first published in 1961. The media appearances that followed included numerous television series and in 1966 she appeared on the front cover of *Time Magazine*. Consequently she is seen by many as one of the first really famous celebrity television chefs disseminating fine cuisine to the American public. Her status with the contemporary society, beyond foodie-culture, was affirmed by the 2009 film *Julie and Julia*, in which Meryl Streep gave a charismatic performance as the chef, author and television personality. David Strauss' scholarly book *Setting the Table for Julia Child* traces the history of the gourmet food movement in the United States in the years preceding Child's media success. A gourmet movement which, he argues, ensured that Child's promotion of the sensory significance of food and the importance of spending time on its preparation and consumption were greeted favorably by the American public.

The main focus of Strauss' study is the 1930s to the 1960s, with attention drawn to the effects of prohibition

during which 'the prospects for gourmet dining in America reached their nadir' (p. 11), and restaurants, unable to make profits from the sale of alcohol, often closed down. Generally speaking housewives and their servants, it is suggested, lacked the appropriate skills or resources to produce French fine dining in the inter-war period. Thus, according to Strauss, instead of an emphasis on the sensory pleasures of the unhurried and sometimes ritualistic consumption of food and wine, in the first half of the 20th century there was something of an 'alliance of food processors, nutritionists and women's magazines' who saw 'food in largely medical terms as a means of achieving good health' (p. 24), although some 'modified their approach to satisfy other demands' such as men's need for higher calories or 'food they can sink their teeth into' (p. 25). As prohibition ended, lingering over a meal and enjoying the accompanying wine became an option once more, and with the wealthy having experienced French cuisine through travel there was the possibility for a gourmet food movement to emerge. Strauss traces the consequent rise in: the significance of gourmet dining clubs; influential writers and chefs such as Louis Diat; magazines such as *Gourmet*; guidebooks; and the gastronomic tourism of the writer Samuel Chamberlain. He argues they all helped to disseminate practices and ideals of French cuisine in America and thus makes a generally convincing argument that the American public had an acquaintance with French cuisine well before Child's book or her television appearances.

This book emphasises the socio-cultural aspects of the history of gourmet dining, which link the movement to larger social and cultural trends (p. 9), and with this in mind it is important to note that it might be more appropriate to say that only a sector of the public had an acquaintance with French cuisine, for as Strauss himself makes clear (with the exception of wartime) the gourmet movement was predominantly the preserve of 'the growing professional and managerial classes in America' (p. 248). In such an assertion Strauss correctly places his work into the tradition of scholars who emphasize the significance of food and its production and consumption to constructions of class, gender and national identity formation, an area of scholarly research all too frequently ignored by cultural historians.

There is however scope for debate about the ways in which food cultures were and are challenged, shifted and changed; there is perhaps a sense that the values and practices of the gourmet cuisine culture of the elite trickled down to the wider American public in Strauss' argument. One way in which he suggests that this cultural dissemination took place was through the post-war 'refashioned, luxury lifestyle magazines, which' he argues 'shaped the values and lifestyles of a rising upper-middle class' (p. 10). Whilst magazines certainly did and continue to provide a lexicon of images, ideas and ideals through which individuals create identities, the degree to which they shape lifestyle or had a significant influence in American or any other culture is open to much debate. Food production and consumption remain one area in which social classes and regional and national identities can exert and express agency and identity; one area in which it is remarkably difficult to exert pressure and where there is much resistance to values and lifestyles being shaped.

Furthermore, if one compares Strauss' presentation of the inter-war gourmet movement in America with that in Britain, one distinct area of differentiation lies in the ways in which factions of the elite used gourmet food in America to maintain their gender and class exclusivity. In Britain, as I shall argue below, the gourmet movement attempted to address a much wider audience during this era, thanks to the public service broadcasting of the BBC and the use by the Gas Company of Marcel Boulestin for their advertising campaigns. Boulestin was a strong proponent not only of French cuisine, but also of greediness and pleasure over nutrition, as well as being a celebrity-restaurateur. Arguably this example suggests that some of the boundaries and distinctions of the gourmet movement may be more fluid, shifting and porous than they first appear.

Strauss' focus on gourmet dining clubs and print media, by his own omission, side-lines the importance of restaurants; furthermore, although there is an emphasis in his analysis on the socio-cultural aspects of the ritualised and elitist dining clubs, a consequence of the areas he focusses on is that he explores a predominantly male and public face of gourmet culture. There is some discussion of female gourmets and in time of female gourmet dining, and indeed, as Strauss points out, Julia Child was a member of a female gourmet dining club in Paris. There is, however, an implied gendered distinction between the structured consumption and appreciation of food and wine as a pleasurable activity defined as gourmet dining, and food

consumption in the home. In making this division, Strauss is not alone. For example, Mennell argues that food writing can be categorized as either gastronomic literature or cook books (1) with the latter often associated with female domestic cooking and the former with male and public food consumption. The writers Strauss discusses could be categorised as writing in the genre of gastronomic literature whilst Strauss argues that 'with the publication of Julia and Simca's book, however, gourmet dining became increasingly a home based activity featuring the production, as much as the consumption, of gourmet food; moreover most of the leaders of this burgeoning sector of the movement were women? (p. 246). I suspect their work was rather less radical; furthermore, in their texts, as much as the gourmet magazines which preceded them, there is massive difference between reading magazines or cookery books, watching television shows and actually picking up an egg whisk or a filleting knife. Cookery books as much as literary gastronomic writing are in themselves a pastime, a way of passing time and thinking 'what if?' and importantly a space within which to flirt with potential identity positions that may never be taken up.

Gourmet writers aiming for British audience did sometimes adopt a literary style, and for example Elizabeth David produced books in the post-war era which were by no means instruction manuals to be followed by novice cooks. However such distinctions are not necessarily so clear cut. Marcel Boulestin's first book, *Simple French Cooking for English Homes*, was published in 1923 and reprinted the same year, as well as in 1925, 1928, 1930 and 1933. Subsequent books and journalism, for a range of print media included *Evening Standard* and *the Daily Express* as well as *Country Life*, *Harpers Bazaar* and *Vogue*, suggest he was able to produce both a literary style and simple instructions and menus for housewives and servants to follow. Similarly in Britain, in the late 1950s and 1960s, women's magazines and the public and television demonstrations of Fanny Craddock attempted to merge the promotion of a gourmet approach to food and references to tourism with simple step-by-step guides as to how to recreate this experience.

Strauss suggests that gourmet food appears to have become synonymous with French fine dining in America as early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries when it was the practice of a 'small, moneyed, well-travelled elite that was effectively isolated from mainstream America' (p. 7). This is, however, an area that Strauss refers to but does not really interrogate or develop, although he does note that the scarcity of many ingredients and skills meant that the obsession with French food by the gourmet movement broadened, in time, to sometimes include Russian, Italian or Greek food. Indeed the growing influence of Italian cuisine, promoted by Elizabeth David in the post-war era, can also be identified in Britain. In America the European influence seems to have remained significant even at the end of the 20th century. The degree to which this constructed an insecure sense of a borrowed national identity could usefully have been explored further, alongside how it maintained the cultural trope of Europe as a site of culture and the gourmet movement's elitist associations.

In Britain, as early as the Victorian era, the upper middle classes had similarly come to increasingly see a taste for French food as a mark of 'distinction'.(2) The reworking, stretching and slippage which throughout the 20th century shifted the 'meanings' attached to French cuisine, so that it has perhaps become a much more integral part of popular food tastes in Britain than in the United States, is complex and multi-faceted. The distance and expense of travel from the USA to France, even in the 21st century, arguably restricts access to 'authentic gourmet dining?' even in the 21st century to the wealthy elite. With the advent of cheaper ferry prices, and the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994, access to French gastronomy was more widespread in Britain where a much greater number of families began to take holidays or even day-trips to enjoy the culinary delights of France, experiencing *fruits de mer* and bringing home the products of French patisseries. Importantly, in the early days of the promotion of French gourmet food in the UK it was not necessarily imbued with what Bourdieu refers to as 'cultural capital'.(3) Consequently, what might well be considered a 'misappropriation' of the styles and tastes of the gourmet movement can be identified on the supermarket shelves at the end of the 20th century with a plethora of French sticks and convenience foods to create French food at home.

In Britain the uncoupling of gourmet food's associated with masculinity and the elite can already be identified on the inter-war BBC, which promoted an ethos of 'educating, informing and entertaining?' the general public, in that order. It broadcast an eclectic range of self-proclaimed experts on food, including

nutritionists, housewives and gourmet movement representatives (notably Ambrose Heath and Marcel Boulestin). Although in the 1930s Boulestin's Covent Garden restaurant, which served only French food, had the Prince of Wales and Wallis Simpson amongst its clientele, he had a strongly populist strand. He may have catered for the tastes of the urbane, British elite, but in his early engagement with broadcasting media (as a radio personality and the very first TV Chef on the fledging BBC) Boulestin promoted not hotel or restaurant food but French peasant food. The rural and the feminine cooking of the housewife was a style of cooking which, he suggested in his first radio broadcast, avoided the waste found in many British kitchens. (4) He extolled the kitchen and food as being at the very heart of the home, something women should take pride in despite the struggles that poverty and financial hardship of the economic depression during the inter-war years. In a broadcast talk entitled *Kitchen Sense*, addressed to working-class and lower-middle-class women, that is, those looking after their own homes, he urged that a woman: 'do her utmost; and that she may do it not with resignation, for that is the wrong attitude in life; she must take pleasure in her fight and in the same way personal satisfaction in the performance of domestic duties' 'I can imagine no more charming picture than that of the wife seeing to the perfection of the evening meal and the husband on his way home from work looking forward to it. Happiness sits smiling at their table'. (5) Here food production and preparation is not hidden away and undertaken by servants or hotel staff, but is central to the home, and integrated in space and significance with food consumption. Raising the status of cooking and housewifery was a version of femininity and feminism that was espoused by the large domestic women's organizations such as the Women's Institute Movement, rather than those more traditionally associated with inter-war feminism, but it had popular support in the era and again at the turn of the century in writing and broadcasts (see for example Nigella Lawson).

It is the nature of the carefully defined and tightly researched archival work which Strauss's book represents that it is difficult for the conclusions which emerge to engage fully with the contradictory and complex nature of the boundaries that are created, recreated and stretched, between classes and genders certainly, but also perhaps between public and private, between texts and their readers and in this case between gourmet food and home cooking. However, as Strauss's book takes its place in the histories of food, and shifting discourses of domesticity in America, it will no doubt stimulate debates around, and analysis of, these boundaries.

Notes

1. S. Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Champaign, IL, 1996). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. M. Beetham 'Of recipe books and reading in the nineteenth century: Mrs Beeton and her cultural consequences?', in *The Recipe Reader*, ed. J. Floyd and L. Foster (Lincoln, NE, 2010). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *BBCWA*, 26 April 1927. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *BBCWA*, 28 June 1935. [Back to \(5\)](#)

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