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The Invention of the Restaurant. Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture

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This, Rebecca Spang's first book, is the well-merited recipient of the Thomas J. Wilson prize, awarded by Harvard University Press to the best book it publishes in a given year. *The Invention of the Restaurant* concerns the emergence of the restaurant as public space and the concomitant development of an authentic discourse and doctrine of gastronomy which has its adherents to this day. Gastronomic skills have been part of the definition of gentlemanliness for more than a century, in Britain as in France; Dorothy L. Sayers's renowned detective hero, Lord Peter Wimsey, was an epicure, and wine-tasting is nowadays a popular activity of many middle-class couples, for whom it is as closely associated with cultural superiority and the display of taste as going to the opera. Moreover, who in English-speaking culture today does not immediately think of France in connection with the history of cookery? The cordon bleu, Escoffier, gastronomy-cuisine and Frenchness are inseparably connected, and this is as true today as it was in 1820. These connections of taste with elitism, cuisine with a particularly French culture, savoir-faire and savoir-manger with social status, are all among the problems considered by Spang in tracing their emergence as an inseparable part of the identity of the restaurant over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, it should be noted that an activity which has possessed such cultural significance for so long has not gone without a history; albeit a very different kind of history from that which Spang wishes to offer. Spang's approach can be allied with the so-called 'new cultural history', currently the principal mode of writing French history around the Revolutionary period, and exemplified by the writings of such as Lynn Hunt, Sarah Maza, or Dena Goodman. It bears all the hallmarks of that approach: rich documentation, critical engagement with the sources, painstaking archival research, combined into a readable, approachable book which is hard to put down, and mingles the sources upon which it is built as a *nouvelle cuisine* dish

combined its original ingredients. (I am writing here of the original *nouvelle cuisine* which, Spang argues, informed restaurant culture in the late eighteenth century.) Historians, cultural or otherwise, can reap rich rewards from this work. This is not just because of its rewriting of a whole existing historical canon, although that in itself is an impressive and awesome task, handled gently and generously by the author. It is rather because, as a model of cultural history, this book is a delightful piece. It shows more plainly than any other that a work which can fascinate the lay reader can also be a skilled and scholarly contribution to the field; an enviable achievement.

Of what does that achievement consist, seen from the historical standpoint, and where are its weaknesses and strengths? Established restaurant history, often written by connoisseurs and restaurant critics, presents the origin and development of the restaurant as self-evident, and the explanatory model is so dominated by gastronomic self-accounting since the early 1800s that the existing history of restaurants virtually neglects their pre-Revolutionary history. Spang's account breaks sharply with this 'gastro-hagiography'. In its place she offers an institution which had its roots in the display of sensibility and physical debility in the final decades of the eighteenth century, and came to represent a form of shelter from political intervention where gustatory delights were elevated to an art form. I find it helpful to compare Spang's account of the restaurant to work in sociology of knowledge concerning the formation and stabilising of cultural objects. Wiebe Bijker's study of the bicycle raises many similar theoretical issues to those addressed by Spang's book. Technological histories tell teleological tales of the inevitability of the bicycle's being a familiar, two-wheeled object with clearly defined uses. They tend to efface the very different purposes and forms of objects which have been roped into the account of the bicycle's 'origins', as if these were mistakes on the way to an ideal, yet-to-be-realised bicycle. From the beginning of her work, Spang problematises our retrospective vision and understanding of the restaurant as space or cultural object by pointing to its fluidity, its controversial identity over the period between the 1760s and the 1800s. Like sociologists of knowledge, she shows how a variable, contested, cultural entity with a succession of different political and cultural meanings could eventually develop into a familiar institution. It was the identity of *practices* within the restaurant-separate tables, movable mealtimes, menus, fixed prices, waiters, the invisibility of culinary activity-which linked the pre-Revolutionary *maison de sante* or house of health to the 1820s and 1830s restaurant, which served a social function close to what we know today. Spang points to the persistence of certain aspects of restaurant life which do not seem, *prima facie*, to be central to the definition of what a restaurant is: the tense combination of private consumption and conspicuous personal display; the attention to furnishings, particularly mirrors, a stock-in-trade of restaurants throughout the period she discusses; the moment of paying the bill. These repertoires of self-conduct, the alternating management of the visibility and orderliness of restaurant behaviour, were all quite central to the forging of the restaurant's cultural meaning. Denis Diderot, editor of the *Encyclopedie*, who was fond of describing his meals to his lover Sophie Volland, outlined his first visit to a restaurant in 1767 only in terms of furnishings and practices: *Did I like the restaurant*! Yes indeed: a limitless taste. Service is good, rather expensive, but at the time one wants. The pretty hostess never comes to chat with her clients; she is too honest and decent for that; but her clients go and chat with her as much as they like, and she answers very well. One eats alone. Everyone has his little cabinet where his attention wanders: she comes to see of her own accord whether you need anything; it's a marvel, and it seems everyone is praising it. (Tourneux edition, vol. XIX:254, letter CVI) It is at this point that Spang's study extends the boundaries of the studies of cultural objects produced by sociologists of knowledge. For, as she stresses, the restaurant was not merely a cultural institution, but also, indeed primarily, a public space, in which certain new sorts of behaviours were constructed. These were not merely to do with eating, but to do with knowing about which sorts of behaviours (sex, singing, paying, seeing, and being seen) were appropriate in restaurants and under what circumstances. In this respect Spang's book contributes to a particular historiographical problem of late eighteenth-century France. In examining the restaurant as public space, her account raises the issue of how 'public' and 'private' are to be defined for this period. Given the extent of work on this topic, and the number of models and exemplars (Masonic lodges, cafes, academies) which occupy the interests of historians, it seems astonishing that, as Spang notes, 'the restaurant seems, for most historians' purposes, to have been neither public nor private but instead nearly invisible' (85). Did 'public' mean 'open to all'? In that case, most Old Regime sites were not public. Could it be taken to denote particular types of behaviour, such as sociability? In that case, the

restaurant must be excluded. If one takes 'public' in a commercial sense, and attends, as British historians of consumption have done, to the levelling effect of money, then the restaurant fits well, and as Spang notes, helped to shape the notion of an equivalence between goods and value which was not established in businesses at the time. If 'public' is to be taken primarily in terms of 'political' life, then the Pont-Neuf was clearly more public than any salon, cafe or restaurant. Likewise, secondary studies have not defined privacy particularly well - academies were exclusive, but not domestic, and most institutions and circles, including 'political' service such as the crown administration, were entered by personal connections. This issue takes us away from the ostensible subject of Spang's book but towards one of its central outcomes. Her argument begins a long overdue critique of the models of Habermas and Elias. In this sense her discussion of the restaurant as public space possesses considerable historiographical significance.

Spang's work is innovative, too, in locating medicine within cultural history. Such an approach has been prompted in part by the materials which she has used: restaurants began life not as places but as dishes, concentrated meat essences served by cooks to ailing members of wealthy households-'restoratives', in short, as the literal translation suggests. Bridging the gap between history of medicine and cultural history is not simple. One of the strengths of the new cultural history, as well as one of its shortcomings, is its tendency to generate syntheses, to concentrate on unity rather than rupture. Unlike many of the new cultural historians, historians of science and medicine would be inclined to shun a univocal interpretation of a medical debate, and would tend to search for conflicting significances ascribed to particular cultural phenomena. Spang's approach is actually rather different. She treats medical writings as on a par with other sources which she uses. Her aim is not to problematise the claims about the body, health and medicine expounded in such texts, but rather to use such sources to generate a single argument about restaurant culture and the emergence and transformation of the restaurant. As such, contemporary writings on medicine and health play an evidential role in chapters 1 and 2, where Spang treats the restaurant in its early form, as a setting for the conspicuous display of ill health; but in later chapters the question of health and eating seems largely abandoned. The tensions that she sets up in the early part of the book between sobriety and self-indulgence, health and gourmandise, are not followed through; so we never find out why healthy eaters deserted the restaurant. Yet it is clear that still in the 1810s, gastronomic and scientific writers explicitly addressed one another in their writings, debating the morality of eating with vim and glee. I do not wish to suggest that Spang should have been writing a history of medical accounts of food instead, but perhaps a comparison between gastronomic and other forms of food writing might have been in order for the post-Revolutionary period, to avoid the risk of obscuring the vast differences and disagreements over the nature of food in the period.

Spang hinges her discussion of the health concerns of early restaurant visitors around one particular medical condition, weak-chestedness. I am in complete agreement with her about the value of ranking indigestion as an enlightened ailment alongside the much better-studied complaint of nerves, as manifested in vapours, hypochondria and hysteria, so well known from the work of George Rousseau, Roy Porter and others. But weak-chestedness, although very important, was very far from being the only medical condition resulting from wrong eating. Diet played a prominent role in causing a huge range of medical complaints, from general states of ill health to more specific ailments-also with powerful cultural resonances - such as gout, dropsy, or 'nocturnal pollutions'. The selection of weak-chestedness also leads Spang to imply that attempts to preserve health by eating formed a single set of activities; but contemporary medical writings and 'healthy eating' cookbooks actually depended upon a humoural model in which the consumption of foods with particular qualities (wet or dry, hot or cold) caused the body to deviate in various directions from an ideal state. Diet was thus to be tailored to correct these errors, but what was good for one eater was pernicious for another. The physical causes of food-induced disease were similarly varied: the rotting of food in the stomach, mentioned by Spang, was only one of several causal models which included hot foods that burnt the blood or made the humours boil, and coarse foods which clogged the passages of the body. A more detailed account of the models of illness and of the body being advanced in the contemporary medical literature would have been valuable.

In particular, the question of medical regimen might have been raised. Regimen has particular relevance for Spang's arguments because it touched upon many of the categories of behaviour which she raises. Firstly, it

was a primary means for individuals to participate in health reform and negotiate with medical practitioners, cooks, and presumably restaurateurs by defining and controlling their own daily practice of eating, sleeping, exercise, clothing, bathing, breathing and so on. Secondly, alimentary regimen imposed dietary regularities upon the individual eater which were highly conspicuous-they often involved the refusal of hospitality, the rejection of foodstuffs in a society where food was still an important sign of status, and the maintenance of a rigid timetable and dietary restrictions. A comparison with the restaurant would be most interesting. Spang characterises it as a space of personal liberty, but notes that 'In its initial form, ... the restaurant was specifically a place one went *not* to eat' (2). But how did it differ from the private kitchen in which the eater's cook was formally instructed by his or her physician? And how did restaurateurs claim legitimately to represent health? This was a much-contested issue in the period, as the authority of physicians was progressively undermined by Crown support of competing medical corporations such as surgeons and apothecaries.

As healthy eaters were displaced by *gastronomes*, Spang turns her attention to the development of gastronomy as a literary genre and medium for the definition of French national character (although, as she points out, restaurants in fact catered only for the wealthiest inhabitants of Paris, and were hardly typical of French eating). At this point she moves more assertively into the well-trodden terrain of French culinary writing, from restaurant reviews and plays to the publications of Grimod de La Reyniere and Brillat-Savarin. Of course literature and restaurants are now an obvious pairing. Spang has fine examples of restaurant reviewers penning their texts about great meals. But I wondered how restaurants captured this literary form so definitively, given that they were only one among the establishments which Grimod de La Reyniere listed as contributing to the state of *bonne chere* in post-Revolutionary France. Perhaps in keeping with her dismissal of the traditional myth that restaurants were founded by dispossessed cooks from noble households, Spang also makes little mention of the writings of famous post-Revolutionary chefs. Yet of course the 1810s to 1820s was also the time in which cooks such as Careme attained a hitherto unknown level of cultural and social status. The literature produced by such individuals was as widely read as the gastronomic classics of Grimod de La Reyniere, and Spang's revisionism prompts questions about the relationship between the personality cult of the chef and the cultural status of the restaurant, a relationship central to the traditional history of gastronomy in France.

In the early nineteenth century the restaurant became a setting for the generation of new cultural forms which substituted for political engagement. The model of the restaurant generated by contemporary commentators, as a place which diverted the seditious impulses of Parisians, is somewhat belied by its ostensible clientele, recruited from among a social elite which actually was the prime beneficiary of Revolutionary upheaval-in the long run. Spang's principal argument picks up on the creation of middling culture in France during the early decades of the nineteenth century, exploring the restaurant as a site for the production of definitions of 'Frenchness' in a very fine chapter. After about 1810, she therefore considers it as a primarily cultural, rather than political, space. To return to the problem which I raised initially concerning the ways in which it is possible to write a history of cultural objects and local meanings: Once the meaning of the bicycle had been more or less stabilised in one culture, it was possible to export it to other cultures, and for all bicycles to be comparable and equivalent in certain crucial ways. We now think we know what a bicycle is, and how it is used (the practical aspects may be harder to master). If restaurants denoted Frenchness, what did their export to Prussia and England in the 1810s, along with French culinary texts and chefs, signify? We are accustomed to a literature which argues for the *importation* of German cultural models by such as Mme de Stael in the same period. On my daily walk to the library here, I often pass the famous establishment founded by Lutter and Wegner in 1811. It seems interesting that the restaurant as institution could so shed all the negative connotations of Frenchness as to be popular in a city whose cultural life was so coloured by the imperial tendencies of Frenchmen. At any rate, it seems a thought-provoking fact that this transmission could be so rapid and so apparently unproblematic-especially as restaurants did not spread to the French provinces until after the mid-nineteenth century. I hunger for a second volume which might tell of the transmission of the restaurant beyond the culture in which it had initially arisen.

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