A Preliminary Autopsy

It is not entirely clear why the sudden death of the *master chef* Bernard Loiseau caused such a stir in France. His wide notoriety surely played a role, as his beaming smile was displayed seemingly everywhere, on television screens and across the pages of all the major mass-market magazines.¹ It may also have been the sheer incongruity between the brutal way that he died and the grandeur and elegance of the world that he left behind. Or perhaps it was that, after having occupied such a central place in such a revered domain, it was simply impossible for most people to imagine haute cuisine without the presence of Bernard Loiseau, who was among the grandest of the grand chefs of France when, on the afternoon of February 24, 2003, at the age of fifty-two, he retired to his bedroom with his hunting rifle and took the hard way out. While a medical autopsy left no doubt that it was he who had pulled the trigger, the absence of a suicide note left family, the media, colleagues in the culinary profession, and most everyone else searching for a motive.

¹ A poll published by the trade magazine *L'Hôtellerie* indicated that almost nine out of ten French people recognized the face of Bernard Loiseau, making him perhaps the most widely recognized of all the chefs in France, according to William Echikson, in “Death of a Chef,” *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003, p. 61.
Almost immediately, speculation centered on the downgrading of Loiseau’s la Côte d’Or restaurant by the Gault&Millau guide, which had recently lowered his rating from nineteen to seventeen, out of a possible twenty points. Paul Bocuse, Loiseau’s longtime friend and probably the most venerated of the grand chefs of France, bitterly declared “Bravo, Gault-Millau, you have won,” noting that “Gault-Millau took away two points, and, along with two or three press articles, that is what killed Bernard.”

Jacques Pourcel, renowned chef and president of the Chambre Syndicale de la haute cuisine française, circulated a letter to his colleagues blaming “terrible media pressure” for the death of Loiseau; while François Simon, food critic for the newspaper Le Figaro, suggested that Loiseau’s la Côte d’Or might have been in danger of losing its third star in the all-important Michelin Guide.

The entire French culinary profession seemed to engage in a long moment of introspection following Loiseau’s demise, with the outsized influence of the gastronomic guides as a central focus of culpability. Within months of the tragedy a survey of head chefs was commissioned by a restaurant industry trade magazine that posed the question unambiguously: “The tragic disappearance of Bernard Loiseau, last February 24th has revived a lively polemic on gastronomic guides and critiques. What is your opinion of the latter?” The chef/respondents were offered several structured answers to choose from, but overall their survey responses were quite muted. Only 10.5 percent of the chefs agreed with the statement that the gastronomic guides “create an impossible level of stress”; while an even smaller percentage (7.7 percent) indicated that they had themselves been judged “wrongly” by the guides (37.5 percent thought that food critics failed to visit their restaurants regularly enough to make an informed critique). It probably should not be surprising that just a small percentage of chefs were willing to express enmity or resentment with respect to gastronomic guides since,

---


4. The survey, by Néorestation magazine, was conducted by fax on a sample of 3,920 head chefs in a wide variety of restaurants and kitchens (commercial, institutional, independent, and chain establishments) and had a 9.92 percent (389) response rate. See Patrice Cecconello, “Les Guides gastronomiques: Un baromètre indispensable,” Néorestation, no. 400, July/August 2003, p. 36.
as a group of “believers,” these practitioners of the gastronomic faith could not be expected to easily or simply reject the system of belief that governed their professional lives.

In response to the death of Loiseau, a representative of the *Gault&Millau* guide immediately rushed to deny culpability. Its head, Patrick Mayenobe, reportedly asserted, “It’s not a bad score or one less star that killed him. . . . This great chef must have had other worries,” adding “on the contrary, he said in 2000 that if he passed from 19 to 17 out of 20 [rating points], that it would be a formidable challenge for him to return to the top”; while a spokesperson for *Michelin* reportedly “would only express sadness for Loiseau’s death and confirm that his stars were safe—for this year at least.”

While the loss of a *Michelin* star could have a seriously damaging effect on the career of a chef, including on their position and reputation within the profession, and therefore in French society, not to mention the economic viability of their restaurant, the power of the *Gault&Millau* rating was much less significant at the time of Loiseau’s death. I show in this book that not only was its power of consecration always a distant second to the power of the *Michelin Guide* but whatever influence it once wielded has diminished in recent years, thereby complicating any clear understanding of his reaction. After all, at the time Loiseau took his life he still held the highest rating in the more important *Michelin Guide.*

Of course it was also possible that Loiseau harbored a “fear of falling,” or an anxiety about losing a *Michelin* star. Indeed, several months prior he had attended a meeting at *Michelin* headquarters in Paris, where—after having been gently warned, “stay in your kitchen and don’t do too much business”—he is said to have confided to Paul Bocuse that “he would kill himself if he lost a star.” Later, *Michelin*’s director of publications, Derek Brown, with whom Loiseau had met, denied the significance of the meeting, noting that “Bernard was his usual charming, warm, dynamic self. . . . We didn’t and never would threaten to take away a star, and we did not advise him what to do. We are not a consultancy, after all.”

---


6. At the time of his suicide he knew that he had retained his three stars because while the annual *Michelin* ratings are typically released in March, they happened to have been released in early February in 2003 (as they were again in 2004), several weeks before his suicide. Smith, “Bitterness Follows,” p. A3.


Apart from the explicit reactions by the gastronomic guides, defense of the system of gastronomic criticism was mounted by the press on both sides of the Atlantic. One, issued by the former restaurant editor of the *New York Times*, seemed calculated to deflect criticism of the guides by underscoring the relative insignificance of *Gault&Millau*, pointing to its “precipitous decline” in recent years and its low standing in relation to the importance of *Michelin* stars, while noting that “if Mr. Loiseau was distraught, it probably wasn’t over stars,” adding (adamantly, but somewhat incongruously): “I don’t believe for a minute that the press killed the chef. To the contrary, Bernard Loiseau benefited mightily from press laurels. In 1986, he rose to prominence when a popular French magazine named him an up-and-coming culinary genius. The magazine was *Gault&Millau*.9"

In the issue that followed his suicide, the weekly *Paris Match* displayed the photo of a bright, smiling Loiseau on its cover and an eight-page photo spread of the chef inside that presented him interacting happily with his family and colleagues, at work and at play, and included one photo of him out hunting, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. The accompanying article surveyed the various theories of his suicide, playing down the issue of the guides, while emphasizing instead his powerful hunger for cultural recognition (“It was my goal to be huge as a chef, like one of the greatest of soccer stars” p. 40) as well as the financial pressures he faced that threatened to mire him in debt until the year 2010.10 It is quite true that after being granted his third star in the all-important *Michelin Guide* in 1991, Loiseau embarked on an ambitious and expensive series of renovations and additions to his la Côte d’Or restaurant; he also purchased three bistros in Paris, creating a culinary edifice that made him the first grand chef to be listed on the Paris stock exchange.11 But even though he had headed a substantial business operation, Loiseau’s finance director rejected the idea that money was the cause of his death, suggesting a less rational motivation: “All of that is completely false. The restaurants were doing quite well”; he stressed

---

9. Whether or not Loiseau benefited is really beside the point, just as the suicide is really beside the point with respect to the influence of the guides on culinary practices. In fact, even more recently than 1986 Loiseau was named one of the “Best Eight Chefs of France” in the magazine, published every trimester. See Luc Dubanche, “Bernard Loiseau: La force du bâtisseur,” *Gault&Millau*, no. 337, Winter 1999–2000, pp. 54–58.


that although “Bernard started to think that if he didn’t change, next year he’d lose a star, then reservations would go down, debts would accrue, and he would go bankrupt,” Loiseau had no pending financial troubles at the time of his suicide: “It would have taken a decade of losses before we were bankrupt.”12 If the problem was not financial, then what could it have been? Speculation turned to the effects of stress and overwork on Loiseau’s mental and emotional state, a completely reasonable assumption in a profession where the top chefs are expected to maintain establishments that consistently perform at a level approaching perfection. In her article “A Chef Dies: How Many Stars Are Enough?” Patricia Wells, the influential food critic of the International Herald Tribune, recounted her final interaction with Loiseau: “The last time I spoke with Loiseau was in October 2000, at a Michelin luncheon to honor the world’s three-star chefs. Then, the chef Michel Guerard told me that the challenge of maintaining three stars is ‘like Michelin asking us to be Olympic champions every day.’ Loiseau added, ‘The toughest thing in life is to endure.’”13

It was Dominique Loiseau, Bernard’s wife and collaborator, a former food writer and the second most conspicuous personality at la Côte d’Or, as the face that greeted customers at the entrance to the dining room, who openly raised the issue of Loiseau’s mental state. “Gault&Millau didn’t kill him” she told a journalist, recounting his periodic bouts of depression and chronic overwork.14 Newly chosen to lead the ownership group of her husband’s enterprises, and having served as codirector of Bernard Loiseau S.A. from the time of its initial listing on the stock exchange, Dominique Loiseau took firm control of the family business shortly after his death.15 Although seemingly in the best position of all to assess her husband’s mental state, as the new sole restaurant owner her primary goal was now to maintain the restaurant’s three-star Michelin rating, so it also would have been exceedingly impolitic for her to join in the public criticism of the gastronomic guides.16

16. Echikson noted of Dominique Loiseau (“Death of a Chef,” p. 67) that “she was careful not to blame the guidebooks for the tragedy.” Her determination to maintain a three-star rating was something that she was explicit about, and it was a goal that she shared with her
All of this suggests that a definitive answer to the question, “Who Killed Bernard Loiseau?” would remain elusive. Although a medical autopsy would surely verify that he had died of a gunshot wound, and a forensic analysis would have confirmed that it had indeed been Loiseau who pulled the trigger, thereby satisfying official medical or legal inquiries, and a psychoanalytic postmortem might have provided names for the psychic demons that tormented him, I propose that none of these would permit us to truly understand what caused Loiseau to take his own life. The standard measures remain incomplete, because to fully understand the nature of the pressures and forces bearing down on a human being requires attention to the logic of the social world that they inhabit and an analysis of their trajectory through it. In other words, more so than a medical autopsy or forensic psychology, what is needed is a “social autopsy.”

As with a medical autopsy, a social autopsy should avoid treating the event as a tragedy (however tragic it undoubtedly is when a person is driven to such despair), not only because we want to reduce the analytical distortions that sentimentality inevitably generates but because tragedy represents just one mode of expression through which social recognition is conferred, and the social construction of recognition is an important element of what we want to understand about French gastronomy, the social world inhabited by Bernard Loiseau. This is why, however counterintuitive it may seem, a social autopsy cannot be accurately performed if we primarily rely on the people closest to the subject for our evidence, since those most closely implicated in the subject’s life may actually be deeply implicated in the social mechanisms we are trying to understand. For example, each of those surrounding Bernard Loiseau tended to shift culpability to the other, with the chefs blaming the guidebooks and the food writers, and pointing us away from the chef profession, while the guidebooks and the food writers denied culpability, pointing us toward his finances. His financial adviser denied that he had had money problems and implied that the chef may have had a shaky mental state, while his wife, who now owned and managed the restaurant, tended to shift responsibility to the guidebooks and food writers, according to Steven Greenhouse in “A Restaurant in Mourning Keeps Its Sights on Its Stars,” New York Times, September 10, 2003, pp. D1 and D6.

17. This was the term employed by Eric Klinenberg in his dissection of the social, political, and institutional “organs” of the city of Chicago in his book, Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
and the food writers), pointed us toward the pressures of the profession as the cause of her husband’s unsteady mental condition.

Culpability circulated in this way because everyone had a certain stake in the picture being sketched, with each seeking to protect his or her particular interests deriving from each one’s position in relation to all of the others while, at the same time, upholding the integrity of the overall arrangement. Viewed together, those who surrounded Bernard Loiseau in life and who came forward to try and make narrative sense of his death resembled, in miniature form, the universe of French gastronomy itself. That is, it was a microscopic version of the French gastronomic “field,” by which we mean a distinctive and relatively insulated domain of human activity, with its own history, its own rules and institutions, as well as its distinctive antagonisms, harmonies, resources, and rewards. The focus of our analysis is not Bernard Loiseau, or any of the other great chefs who have occupied dominant positions in the gastronomic field, but we must draw frequently on elements of their life (or death) to make sense of the social logic of the French gastronomic field.

The task is to uncover the social forces operating in and through this field of practices; a field in which there are no innocents among the inhabitants, since all participants have a stake in either maintaining or exposing its contradictions and its mysteries. These social forces may be both material and symbolic and will tend to be embodied in economic and cultural practices that are both established and emergent, and to which distinctive social groups are drawn, having been predisposed toward one or another pole of this field. Thus, the sort of social autopsy to be performed must comprise more than the factors that led to a biological death, but that requires analysis of a social life. This includes examination of the field(s) of practice in which social actors operate, the practical context of their practice.

In such an investigation our focus is drawn to the major fault lines running through French gastronomy, as these illuminate the social mechanisms of institutional hierarchy and symbolic authority that govern not only gastronomy but most other cultural fields as well. Within French gastronomy, one of oldest and most prominent fissures has been the tension between artisanal and industrial practices. That is, between those methods of culinary practice largely guided by the skills, experience, traditions, and artistry of grand chefs; and industrial practices principally organized around the deployment of machinery and other technological processes in the various stages of food production, preparation, and distribution. The analytical approach to be taken here is not a straightforward narrative history of French
gastronomy, for it is my view that the trajectory of the field has been mainly shaped during a particular conjuncture in the history of the field. From the 1970s through the 1990s cracks appeared in the system of French gastronomy that expanded fairly widely and threatened to break apart the entire edifice. It is the social character of this break—what it demonstrated about French society and culture and the ways they have been held together—that is the primary object of our investigation. The cracks that opened at the center will be traced as they extend outward into areas of French society that may seem far afield from traditional gastronomic concerns. That is, not only are the shifting tectonic plates beneath the cultural edifice of French gastronomy a focus but also the reverberations of these shifts in such varied developments as the growth of commercial sprawl on the periphery of French cities in the 1970s and the reconfiguration of French rural life and economy in the 1980s and 1990s. We are compelled to widen our analytical lens in this way because (a) the traditional boundaries of the field were themselves stretched and extended during this period, thereby becoming less recognizable than before, the distortion compounded by the addition of new institutional entries into the field; and (b) the simultaneity of changes across widely disparate areas of French life make it nearly impossible to sustain a single, linear narrative to grasp it. Our analysis, therefore, proceeds through several stages in the development of the field, albeit not in linear fashion.

We begin below (in the current chapter) by briefly retracing the roots of the gastronomic field in its emergence as an expression of the French literary imagination and, subsequently, in its institutional expression with the invention of the restaurant in the period following the Revolution. We then advance well into the nineteenth century to track the process by which the gastronomic field acquired its characteristic forms and attained its relative autonomy from other cultural fields. The following chapter (Chapter 2, “The Symbolic Economy of French Gastronomy”) demonstrates the structures of belief and the forms of social organization that sustained the relative autonomy of the gastronomic field through much of the twentieth century. With particular attention to the rules, the customary practices, the sources of value, and the rites of consecration that have organized the rarified world of grand chefs and great restaurants in France, we consider gastronomy as a primary source of cultural power for the French and for the rest of the world. The two chapters that comprise the following section represent an examination of the incursion of industrial processes and commercial mar-
keting techniques that entered the gastronomic field in the 1970s, largely impelled by the corporate investments of American firms and their French cousins. The first, Chapter 3 (“Fast Food in France: A Market for the Impossible”), traces the development, in France, of a market for American-style fast food, emphasizing what fast food represented, in social, cultural, and economic terms for French employers, workers, and consumers, as well as for the contours of the wider gastronomic field. Subsequently, Chapter 4 (“Industrial Cuisine and the ‘Magic’ of Americanism”) presents the wide range of institutions, practices, and practitioners occupying the industrial sector of the French gastronomic field. These include the industries of food processing, institutional catering, and chain restaurants. In taking measure of this sector we are better able to situate it in relation to the gastronomic field as a whole, whose symbolic features draw heavily from the aesthetic vocabulary of haute cuisine. The industrial regions of the field, on the other hand, have been the primary vehicle for introducing American forms of economic (neoliberal) ideas and practices into French society more generally.

As this book seeks to demonstrate, a tectonic shift occurring in the gastronomic field in France scraped the cultural bedrock and changed French society. The character and the dynamics of these transformations are documented in Chapter 5 (“Conflicts of Interest: A Cultural Field in Transformation”) and illustrate the complex and contradictory ways that the major institutions and practitioners of French haute cuisine adapted to the changing configuration of the gastronomic field. The chapter extends the analysis to reveal the paradoxical mechanisms by which the cult of *le terroir* and the related fetishism of “the local” have been largely underwritten by the very forces of standardization, homogenization, and profit maximization that they were created to oppose.

The Foundations of the Field

With its roots tracing back to some of the earliest printed works, late fifteenth-century German and Italian “cookery books,” the symbolic conditions for French gastronomic practice were seen as having been set out with the publication of La Varenne’s *Le Cuisinier François* in 1651. It was a work that summarized the cooking practices of the French nobility and identified a distinctive French way of cooking that was differentiated from medieval foodways in its use of certain spices, flavors, and technical innovations in the food preparation
process. This line of demarcation was increasingly defined by a succession of similar works that were published over the following decades, each of which tended to assert proper culinary practices (through recipes and observations) while disapproving of others. Such jostling served to establish a framework of both old and new within the culinary sphere, thereby setting out, in germinal form, the outline of a modern culinary aesthetic.

The genesis of a French gastronomic field was the product of more than these early published narratives and texts, however. While texts charted the symbolic parameters, practice also required an institutional mooring, and it was the French Revolution that created the conditions for the development of an institutional foundation for haute cuisine. The precise nature of the historical relationship between the Revolution and the restaurant is a subject of varying interpretation, however. The simplest line of explanation argued that the cooks who once worked in the kitchens of aristocratic households were forced to open restaurants when their employers either fled the country or were slain in the Revolution’s aftermath. However, as Stephen Mennell and others have pointed out, “the first of a new form of eating-place open to the public—that which came to be known as the restaurant—made its appearance in Paris during the two decades before the Revolution.”

Probably the most persuasive narrative has argued that by rupturing the guild system the Revolution created the conditions for the transfer of the artisanal practices of haute cuisine from the court to the bourgeoisie via a

---

18. François Pierre de La Varenne, *La Varenne’s Cookery: The French Cook; The French Pastry Chef; The French Confectioner*, trans. Terence Scully (London: Prospect Books, 2006). These methods included the use of bouillon or stock for various dishes, spicing with bouquet garni, the use of egg whites to clarify and fat and flour to thicken, the slow cooking of meats, and the use of a reduction process to concentrate flavor. These were not revolutionary innovations, as Stephen Mennell points out, for they had most likely been practiced for some time in various aristocratic kitchens (*All Manners of Food*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996], pp. 64–74).

19. Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, pp. 72–73, notes the vitriol in the reactions of successive authors to their predecessors. The key works were identified by Revel as including: Nicolas de Bonnefons’s *Les Délices de la campagne* (1645); Pierre de Lune’s *Le Cuisinier* (1656); Jean Ribou’s *L’École parfaite des officiers de bouche* (1662); *L’Art de bien traiter* signed semianonymously by L.S.R. (1674); and Massialot’s *Le Cuisinier royal et bourgeois* (*sic*) (1691) and *Instructions pour les confitures* (1692). See Jean-François Revel, *Un festin en paroles: Histoire littéraire de la sensibilité gastronomique de l’Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Plon, 1995), pp. 172–181.

new institution, the restaurant. The earliest restaurants were enterprises run by sellers of “restorative” bouillons or meat-based consommés (themselves often called “restaurants”) that were ingested to “restore” health and strength. In 1765 a Monsieur Boulanger (who was also known, variously, as Champ d’Oiseaux and Champoiseau), a purveyor of “restaurants,” or bouillons, opened a Paris shop in which he sold (in addition to his restaurants) certain foodstuffs whose sale was restricted by the guild system, and specifically violated the established prerogatives of the traiteurs guild (comprising cooks and caterers). The guild filed a suit against Boulanger but ultimately decided in his favor, thus signaling the approaching demise of the guild system and encouraging these new, generic establishments that sold cooked food, eaten in place. Although it took several decades before the term “restaurant” would be officially recognized for what it was coming to represent, the new establishments flourished after the Revolution. Where there had been approximately one hundred restaurants in Paris prior to the Revolution, the number would rise to five hundred or six hundred under the empire and to some three thousand during the restoration of the monarchy (1814–1848).


22. Prior to the “restaurant” one purchased food in taverns, at inns, and at markets, all located outside of the city walls (beyond the sphere of taxation) or drank in a café, the first of which was opened in 1674 in Paris. One could also purchase foods prepared by traiteurs, rôtisseurs, or charcutiers, who, under guild statutes, held a monopoly over various forms of cooked meats. Rebecca L. Spang, The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 7–11.


24. Various historical accounts of French gastronomy have reported the outcome of the “Boulanger affair” in this way, including Pitte, “The Rise of the Restaurant,” Flandrin and Montanari, FOOD: A Culinary History, p. 474, and Mennell, All Manners of Food, p. 139. However, in her otherwise analytically rich analysis of the rise of the restaurant in France, Spang informs the reader, incongruously, that most accounts have the traiteurs winning their lawsuit, thus restricting Boulanger (and other “restaurateurs”) from selling anything besides these consommés and asserting that “no evidence in the judicial, police, or corporate archives substantiates the story of Boulanger’s defeat [my emphasis] at the hands of the litigious caterers.” See Spang, Invention of the Restaurant, p. 9.

This can perhaps be seen as representing the triumph of Paris over the rest of France as much as it was the triumph of the revolution over the monarchy, for in resolving the division between Paris and Versailles the Revolution shifted the axes of politics, culture, and commerce to the capital as the undisputed center. Moreover, while Paris was becoming renowned for its restaurants, the mystique of the restaurant was amplifying the symbolic construction of Paris, as Rebecca Spang has noted: “As the fame of the city’s restaurants spread, so the myth was disseminated of Paris as the nation’s grand couvert” (which translates to “big place setting”). Widely established in Paris, restaurants were soon spread throughout the country, as traditional cabarets and dance halls (guinguettes) changed themselves into restaurants and as a style of aristocratic grandeur and excess devolved from Paris to various provincial outposts, preserved in the aspic of haute cuisine. As one analyst has written: The refinement once associated with the old aristocratic households could be found in the deluxe restaurants of the grands boulevards of Paris (the Café Riche and the Café Anglais), on the Place Bellecour in Lyon, and in the back streets of Bordeaux. The great restaurants relied on recipes developed and written down by Antonin Carême, the chef who presided over the extraordinaires (official banquets for major state occasions of the Empire and Restoration) and by his successors, Duglére, Urbain Dubois, and, last, but not least, Escoffier. Chefs prepared beautiful creations out of fish and shellfish, foie gras from Strasbourg (which became the very symbol of good dining in France), seasonal game, chicken, and sirloin, all buried beneath mountains of truffles and dripping with brown sauces thickened with cream or butter. Menus at these restaurants could be as long as the dinner menus for the great occasions of the Ancien Régime, but now, for reasons of convenience and price, customers picked and chose the dishes they wanted before the food was prepared and served.

27. Spang, Invention of the Restaurant, p. 235.
It is this sort of cornucopian representation that has been a central part of the complicated illusion of the restaurant; the symbolic dimension that one historian has identified as the restaurant’s mythic core—its legends and lore and mystique. More than mere embellishment, the production of the phantasmagoric has been viewed as a central part of the restaurant’s function.\(^{29}\) Not only did restaurants serve to locate Paris in the French cultural imagination, as we’ve indicated, but, as Rebecca Spang has shown, restaurants can be seen as having symbolically performed a wide variety of “social” tasks. For example, she indicates how on one level, restaurants enacted a distinctively modern and bourgeois sociability as “publicly private” spaces that allowed one to be alone in public, to ignore others while being among them. On another, the restaurant composed a theatrical spectacle calculated to conceal the hellish kitchen area, physically and symbolically separating it (backstage) from the opulence of the dining room “out front.” Moreover, the restaurant provided its customers with an illusion of hospitality, welcome, and generosity that masked any pecuniary interests and, in the context of a bourgeois order that “implicitly required the presence of somebody outside,” represented an institution of both exclusion and envy.\(^{30}\)

In these ways the institution at the very center of French gastronomy, the restaurant, performed an extraordinary amount of symbolic labor, a point to be revisited in subsequent chapters. For the moment, however, it should be noted that in the establishment of French gastronomy a fair amount of the actual work of symbolic construction was performed by a new type of socioliterary persona, the gastronome, a figure who emerged as the product of the very gastronomic universe whose boundaries he was assigned to define and to police.

The term “gastronomy,” meaning “the art and science of delicate eating,” or of eating well, was sometimes used interchangeably with the word “gourmand,” before the latter was increasingly employed as a pejorative term of excess and of greed, as in “glutton.”\(^{31}\) It was in the spirit of the earlier meaning that the notorious Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reynière (1758–1838) published his annual *Almanach des gourmands* over the course of the first decade of the nineteenth century, chronicling the development of French gastronomy; and later, in 1825, Jean-Anthelme

\(^{29}\) Spang, *Invention of the Restaurant*, pp. 234–236.


\(^{31}\) Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, pp. 266–267. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “gourmand” as both “one who is over-fond of eating, one who eats greedily or to excess, a glutton” and “one who is fond of delicate fare; a judge of good eating.”
Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826) published his *Physiologie du goût* (Physiology of Taste) a book of “meditations” on taste, the senses, the preparation of meals, the social character of dining, and the philosophy and aesthetics of food, the table, and the body.

An important genre of gastronomic writing was established through these works, one that served both a devotional function with regard to food and eating and manners and also to render visible the gastronome/author as a social actor in the world that was being depicted and symbolically constructed. Thus Grimod de la Reynière not only told of restaurants visited and of meals eaten but often did so through descriptions of the weekly outings of his “Jury de Dégustateurs” (Taster’s jury) and later, his “Société des Mercredis” (Wednesday Society). These were groups composed of those sophisticated diners that Grimod assembled (and with whom he participated) who gathered together on a weekly basis to dine and to judge dishes and restaurants, thereby casting themselves as central players in the world that Grimod was depicting in his writings. Thus the gastronome-as-tastemaker was essentially brought into being by the gastronome-as-writer. In asserting their evaluative judgments in this way, gastronomic writers prefigured the role played by the gastronomic guides (such as the *Michelin* red guide) as institutional gatekeepers, and, by establishing themselves as arbiters of taste, gastronomes also represented a significant part of the restaurant “public” in this formative period.

In an analysis of the genesis of gastronomy as a cultural field in the nineteenth century, Priscilla Ferguson places gastronomic literature at its very foundation. She argues that through gastronomic writers (Grimod de la Reynière, Carême, Brillat-Savarin) as well as through dominant literary figures from other cultural domains who wrote about gastronomy (Balzac in literature and Fourier in philosophy) the emergent “gastronomic field” was able to receive symbolic fortification from more secure and established cultural fields. Thus as gastronomic writing was accepted as good literature the gastronomic field was afforded a measure of legitimacy, thereby aiding in its establishment and in its achievement of a certain level of autonomy.

According to Ferguson, Brillat-Savarin played a particularly important role in this process because, unlike most of the food writing done by journalists and chefs, his was a noninstrumental viewpoint and his writing had a quality that transcended the domain of gastronomy, placing it “within a larger intellectual and social universe”: “For Brillat-Savarin, the text was its

---

32. See Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, pp. 267, 272.
own end, a status hardly altered by the few recipes included in the work. The often noted stylistic qualities of the *Physiology of Taste*—the anecdotal mode, the witty tone, the language play—give this work an almost palpable literary aura.”

An analytical focus on the importance of literature in the emergence of the gastronomic field is insightful, but two qualifications are in order. One has to do with the limits imposed on a social analysis of the gastronomic field by a focus on literary practices alone. While literature was undoubtedly crucial in the genesis of a gastronomic field in the way that Ferguson has shown, a fuller grasp of its social logic would seem to require that the means of its symbolic construction be conjoined to a broader range of social practices. A second hesitation has to do with the relations between fields, and in particular with the idea that the relative strength of a field (its “cultural resonance” and “cultural resistance” in Ferguson’s terms) is a function of its dependence on its connections to other cultural fields (or in relation to the “larger society” in her words). Despite the fact that it must be demonstrated empirically and not simply asserted, one would expect the strength of a field to rest not so much on its dependence on other fields as on the degree of relative autonomy it enjoys from other fields. In other words, its strength would seem to reside in its ability to operate in terms of its own proper rules and principles of regulation and on its own internal evaluative criteria, thus fortified against principles of evaluation and regulation introduced from other fields (as in the domain of cinema, for example, where the rules and principles governing the artistic field have been challenged, if not superseded by standards introduced from the economic field).

While in the early stages of its formation, gastronomy may indeed have acquired a level of social prestige through the links it was able to forge with individuals and institutions in more established fields, like philosophy and literature; as it gained a certain autonomy (the phase of “consolidation” for Ferguson), it asserted itself as more than a branch of either, and therein lay its strength as a field. In other words, the strength of a field rests on its capacity to uphold and maintain its own rules and its own standards of

---


evaluation, over and above those of competing or neighboring fields. Of course the independence of a field is always relative and a function of its historical trajectory, but achieving independence does not consign a field to “the cultural equivalent of solitary confinement” as Ferguson fears. To the contrary, it can be viewed as a measure of its maturation.

Moreover, however independent they may be at any given historical moment, the various fields of human activity that constitute a society are always structured, hierarchically, in relation to one another, even when the effects of dominance are sometimes expressed negatively, as in the case of the field of culture, which operates (or once did) according to principles directly opposed to those that govern the economic field. The relations that prevail between different cultural fields (as well as between the cultural and the normally more powerful political and economic fields) reflect the relations of relative dominance and subordination of practices within the society, although they may be configured differently in different societies and in different historical periods. Thus just as a field can achieve a degree of independence, the autonomy of a social field may wane or be eroded over time and in relation to other fields in the society.

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, Brillat-Savarin’s meditations on taste, the body, and the aesthetics of food, Grimod de la Reynière’s symbolic construction of a French “public” for restaurants, and chef Antonin Carême’s celebration of the culinary arts, taken together, can be seen as having symbolically constructed a certain design for living, the “art of eating well,” whereby the act of properly nourishing the body simultaneously accomplishes the proper nourishment of the soul. It was a form of perception that, among other things, abandoned the traditional dietetic/medicinal principles of cooking that had governed culinary practice for several hundred years, in favor of a kind of pure gastronomic aesthetic, very much the equivalent of the stance of “art for art’s sake” that emerged contemporaneously in fields of artistic practice. It can be seen as having been one part

36. Pierre Bourdieu’s writings on the relations between fields are widely spread across his huge corpus of work, but he provided a simple diagram to illustrate the relationship between the field of cultural production and the field of power in *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 37–40. Bourdieu has shown that the disavowal of the economy is at the very heart of the functioning and transformation of the cultural field, and he therefore had good reason for entitling his analysis “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed” (my emphasis) in that same volume (pt. I, chap. 1, pp. 29–73). In the same volume, also see chap. 2, “Faith and Bad Faith,” pp. 78–80.

of a gradual process of symbolic labor through which the gastronome was distinguished from (and elevated above) the gourmand. Constructed as the discriminating connoisseur and raised to “the lofty position of high priest for this new cult,” the gastronome was thereby discursively differentiated from the sinful and indulgent gourmand, the glutton who “only knows how to ingest.” The development of a pure gastronomic disposition was an expression of a distinctive “art of living,” the basic inspiration for all acts of cultural distinction, and a (barely) misrecognized assertion of bourgeois dominance in the society. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, “At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness.”

The other purpose that the gastronomic literature served was a nationalizing one, symbolically cementing the distinctive and enduring association that has come to prevail between cuisine and France. Although the association had been recognized earlier, as the culinary practices of the French aristocracy had been exported to royal kitchens throughout Europe (much as the French language had been adopted as the lingua franca of European courts everywhere), the modern concept of the nation was only just emerging in early nineteenth-century France and thus the gastronomic literature inscribed grand cuisine and culinary practice in the national consciousness at a formative moment. The authoritative writing style of the most influential gastronomes, combined with their vigorous and explicit declarations

(pp. 47–112), and see chap. 5, “Field of Power, Literary Field, and Habitus,” in The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Jean-Louis Flandrin points out that in the seventeenth century the fine arts borrowed the metaphor of taste from the culinary domain, where it had long been central to the dietetic principle, because taste is what determined the age and the toxicity of foodstuffs and served to match specific foods to the temperament and the body of the individual. See Jean-Louis Flandrin, “From Dietetics to Gastronomy,” in Flandrin and Montanari, FOOD: A Culinary History.


39. Pierre Bourdieu, DISTINCTION: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) [1979, Les Éditions de Minuit], p. 57. In this case “cuisine for cuisine’s sake” is the expression of a “pure culinary aesthetic” upholding the sublime (in the act of consumption) alongside the artistry of human creation (in the act of production), against merely “cooking to eat” (as a basic practical and biological matter of necessity) or “cooking for sale” (as a commercial matter of business).

40. Priscilla Ferguson (“Cultural Field in the Making,” p. 20) points out that while seventeenth-century cookbooks had asserted the “Frenchness” of their methods, this was a social reference to the French court and aristocracy and not to a geographic France, which did not yet exist.
of a French “culinary nationalism,” helped to establish a firm link between Frenchness and the culinary arts. Contributing to the strength of the association was the centralization that followed the Revolution and that placed Paris (and its restaurants) at the symbolic and institutional center of the nation; as well as the publication, in 1808, of the first of many gastronomic maps of France that redrew the map of the nation using culinary divisions instead of political or administrative boundaries, a visual innovation that was as much a contributor to the national myth-making apparatus as it was a product of it.

The symbolic construction of the French nation entailed more than the elevation of a center, for the other side of the centrality of Paris was its periphery, located in newly created “départements,” with all of the material and symbolic resources that they brought with them into the new nation. The problem of national sovereignty has been worked and reworked in a recurring symbolic project designed to sort out the relationship between the capital and the regions, Paris and the provinces, the center and the periphery. Just as a body of writing and a group of writers offered up a national culinary discourse that buttressed the nation as it “nationalized” its cuisine, writers and their writings also served to symbolically incorporate the regions into the nation by “nationalizing” regional cuisines.

A culinary provincialist literature emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century that took the form of cookbooks focused on regional dishes and that codified traditional local recipes. It was written by local dignitaries, scholars, and cooks; published by local publishers; and intended for local readers in places like Alsace, Gascogne, Languedoc, Provence, and elsewhere. However, after about 1900, regional culinary books were increas-

41. Priscilla Ferguson, “Cultural Field in the Making,” pp. 620–622. While Ferguson makes a good case for the nationalizing tendencies of the gastronomic literature, she is mistaken when she minimizes the importance of regional cuisines (and their literatures) in the national project in order to strengthen the case for centralization. This is unfortunate, for it misses something analytically important about the relationship between the nation and the regions.

42. Grimod de la Reynière introduced “alimentary topography” as a necessary element of gastronomic education; while the carte gastronomique presented a cornucopian image of the French national landscape, symbolically representing France through a visualization of what is now termed its culinary patrimony. See Spang, Invention of the Restaurant, p. 169.

43. The most popular of these books, La Cuisinière de la campagne et de la ville ou la nouvelle cuisine économique by L. E. Audot, was reportedly reprinted forty-one times between 1833 and 1900; and Gérard’s Ancienne Alsace à table (1862) and Tendret’s La Table au pays de Brillat-Savarin (1882) are reportedly still in print today. See Julia Csergo, “The Emergence of Regional Cuisines,” in Flandrin and Montanari, FOOD: A Culinary History, p. 505.
Published in Paris as part of a nationalizing impulse that celebrated “the culinary riches of France in all its regional and social diversity.” Some of these were compilations of local family recipes that sought to survey the breadth of French culinary practices, and others reflected royalist Catholic political sentiments, holding up traditional rural France against the degenerations of modern urbanization (a perspective that, later on, would slide more or less easily into Vichy fascism), but together they reflected a general nostalgia for a rural way of life that was felt to be disintegrating in the swirl of modern industrial development. As Julia Csergo put it:

Perpetuating the romantic conception of the local as a conservatory of the sensibility of the past, a new system of representations emerged in which regional cuisines became the embodiment of local agricultural traditions and rural allegiances, family and religious customs, and nostalgic longing for a pre-industrial, pre-urban past. These reconstructed regional cuisines allowed modern urban society to resurrect its provincial roots by savoring dishes consecrated by memory. Peasants who went to Paris in search of employment frequently revisited the atmosphere of the villages they left behind by choosing to live and associate with others from the same region.

On one level, it is by now axiomatic that nostalgia for the regional and the traditional is a product of nationalizing/centralizing and modernizing forces, so that one is not only preconditioned by the other but actually mutually constitutive of one another. At the same time, however, to the extent that nationalism always represents a mythic social unity, we should keep in mind that the French nation was the assertion of a largely invented sociocultural homogenization.

---

44. Csergo, “Emergence of Regional Cuisines,” p. 506.
45. See Csergo (“Emergence of Regional Cuisines,” pp. 507, 513n3), who also points to the rise of ethnology museums in the latter two decades of the nineteenth century as further expressions of this modernizing nostalgia.
46. This is a central point in Eugen Weber’s classic study, Peasants into Frenchmen. In it he suggests that the public expression of a French national identity in the late nineteenth century covered over social heterogeneity and deep sociocultural divisions between city and country and that patriotic discourse betrayed a widespread practical ambivalence over the nation and the modern (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976). See chap. 7, “France, One and Indivisible” and esp. pp. 112–114. This is a view that is not fundamentally at odds with the notion of nation as a social construct, such as that advanced by Greenfeld, for example, who has viewed the construction of French nationalism as a matter of the appropriation of the category “the people” by eighteenth-century French elites, who redefined citizenship to include