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Susan Pinkard, *A Revolution in Taste: The Rise of French Cuisine, 1650-1800*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv + 317 pp. Bibliography, notes, index, and appendix. \$32.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-82199-5

Review by Julia Abramson, University of Oklahoma.

Seventeenth-century cookbooks indicate a sea change in practice in elite kitchens in France. During the Grand Siècle, distinguished cook-authors overlaid their own techniques and tastes onto inherited ones, and they systematized their gastro-culinary innovations. In parallel with other kinds of artists and artisans associated with the court and with noble patrons, the most prestigious cook-authors imposed “modern” principles onto custom inherited from the Baroque and earlier.

Working from this premise, *A Revolution in Taste* describes elite early modern cooking practices in detail. In my view, the best pages of the analysis are those that offer close readings of canonical Grand Siècle and Enlightenment era cookbooks. The close readings summon the sights and smells of cooking processes as they unfold in time. In turn, walking the reader through selected recipes allows for excursions on topics from changing kitchen technology to pioneering agricultural methods. We start with a recipe, move through its gloss, and finish with the dish placed before us. Susan Pinkard’s study seeks to reconstruct a domain of early modern culture by means of the *explication de recette*.

The premise of *A Revolution in Taste*, many of its insights, and the terms of its analysis are largely familiar from earlier scholarship. Pinkard’s narrative relies extensively on a narrow range of secondary studies, primarily anglophone, published through 2006. The attention given to the canon of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cookbooks is merited. The historical cookbooks under analysis are key primary sources. There is still much that remains to be learned from them and about them. But while reading the cookbooks closely, *A Revolution in Taste* stops short of asking or answering any number of intriguing questions about them and about their relation to aspects of material, social, and cultural history.

A substantive body of scholarship provides context for *A Revolution in Taste*. Scholarship using cookbooks as primary sources for the study of material culture and social history in France dates to the early 1980s. It is hardly necessary to remind readers of H-France that French historians, initially those associated with the Annales school, had earlier turned their attention to the material history of food and foodways as an important domain of investigation. The Annales researchers did not, however, attend to works on cookery as sources that could corroborate, contradict, or correct findings from other evidence. The interrogation of cookbooks would be undertaken in very different contexts. Practicing cooks having extensive collections of historical cookbooks authored early studies. [1] The landmark scholarly publications—on which Pinkard’s study relies heavily—are the seminal volume *Savoring the Past: The French Kitchen and Table from 1300 to 1789* (1983; republished 1996) by the American food historian Barbara Ketcham Wheaton and *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1985; republished 1995) by the British sociologist Stephen Mennell, a follower of Norbert Elias. Over the next three decades, historians of various stripes, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, literary specialists, and also book collectors, museum curators, and

bibliographers would examine the technical manuals on cookery and related subjects. Their studies of French (and European) gastro-culinary culture have given us a sense of its development over time—its evolution and various revolutions. [2] These works have also helped to normalize food and foodways as organizing principles for the writing of social, cultural, and material history.

Thus before reading *A Revolution in Taste*, we had already become familiar with many of its principal points. We already knew from the vein of scholarship just described that influential cookbooks published from the 1650s onward indicate the waning appeal of medieval flavor combinations. The recipes of La Varenne, Bonnefons, L.S.R., Pierre de Lune, and François Massialot show that at least a few highly placed cooks gradually abolished the combination of sweet and salt flavors within the same dish. Instead, they segregated sweet flavors to the close of the meal, the *dessert*. The use of standard spice mixtures that flavored many dishes also diminished. The nearly all-purpose cocktail habitually consisted of black pepper, long pepper, ginger, cloves, grains of paradise (Malagueta pepper), and cinnamon—exotics known in western Europe since Roman antiquity, but whose prestige diminished with declining prices in the seventeenth century. Elite early modern cooks would retain black pepper (in smaller quantities) and salt, while adding plants as flavorings: herbs, garlic, and onions from the kitchen garden. The evolution in flavoring suggests a growing preference for relatively simple tastes. The newer dishes more clearly articulate the single flavor of a main ingredient, avoiding the polyphonous, or muddled, earlier style. [3]

The Grand Siècle technical manuals further develop innovative ways of organizing food preparation, and they deploy cooking techniques that would prove lasting in France. Expanding the repertoire from the acidic sauces often based on *verjus* (the sour juice of pressed unripe grapes), cooks used more smooth, rich sauces that married fat with a thickening agent. The ordering principles that defined late seventeenth-century esthetics more generally can be seen at work in the elite kitchen and dining room. The new manuals would come to assume an extensive, logical *mise-en-place* or pre-preparation. To start cooking, one had to have already prepared any broths necessary to “nourish” a sauce. One was supposed to have assembled a supply of *paquets* (i.e., bouquets garnis) that could be dropped into a dish, then later removed. The nosegay of parsley, chervil, and thyme (with a fortifying strip of *lard* if it was not a fast day) was wanted for the herbal perfume it imparted to a soup, stew, or sauce. The system was becoming visibly modular, that is, capable of analysis into basic building blocks with distinct functions. The international court cuisine and table customs that had prevailed since the medieval era were, in fact, marked by variations in local and national style. The trend to national distinctions increased markedly in the seventeenth-century cookbooks. As elite cook-authors working in France staked out their culinary territory, they also insisted explicitly that that territory was French.

The seventeenth-century tendencies and innovations just described, and that are elaborated in scholarship that preceded Pinkard’s study, may well strike today’s gourmet and reader as familiar for another reason, as well. For they persist in manuals published up to the present day. Their influence shaped the great manuals that build on traditions of elite cooking from the courts and, increasingly from the eighteenth century, the great bourgeois houses. These works continue to underpin the *haute* French gastronomic system that has maintained and further evolved since the early nineteenth century. Antonin Carême’s *Art de la cuisine française au 19ième siècle* (1833) and Auguste Escoffier’s *Guide culinaire* (1903) descend ultimately from the cookbooks written and published during the seventeenth century. And, despite evolutions (or further revolutions) in the cooking of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Escoffier’s book remains the ultimate reference for any number of chefs practicing today.

Pinkard’s study reviews the contours of this landscape, while bringing aspects of it into greater focus than before. In particular, working from selected recipes, the chapters devoted to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (chapters three, four, five, and six of seven total) track the elite early modern cook’s actions in detail. Some observations about the recipes—and about the cooks and their milieus—are speculative, but they are evocative.

To read Pinkard on, for example, La Varenne's white sauce—an emulsion of butter and egg yolk perked up with an acid such as vinegar along with flavorings that could range from chives to anchovies—is practically to be able to cook from her pages. (pp. 118-119) She spells out the chef's ingredients and techniques, notes the chemistry of the sauce. Because the butterfat can carry muted but clear flavors, the sauce participated, she states, in the trend for “natural” cooking. The same, she writes, is true for the recommendation in La Varenne and others for serving some roasts and entrées with no sauce whatever aside from the cooking juices. (Although I would note that older treatises, such as the *Mesnagier de Paris* (ca. 1393), do recommend serving roasts with pan juices that have been merely deglazed. What is lacking is evidence that this practice ever ceased.) As Pinkard notes, simplicity of preparation and clarity of flavor place a premium on cooking technique and timing. A roast chicken, as opposed to a more highly processed and disguised stewed one, or a chicken baked in a tourte, must be done just so. The principles and the practice of this cooking take their place on a continuum that leads through the eighteenth century and up to the present day.

Readers who want to try the white sauce, or a roast, for themselves can in fact do so. The substantial appendix of recipes gives an adaptation of La Varenne's *sauce blanche* and several roast chicken preparations, from Bonnefons, Massialot, and the eighteenth-century author François Marin. (p. 254 and pp. 262-267) These recipes appear along with other *fonds de cuisine* (basic preparations) and finished dishes selected from the major cookbooks.

By contrast with the close readings that figure in the second half of *A Revolution in Taste*, the early chapters are painted in broad strokes. Chapters one and two summarize material drawn principally from a small selection of secondary sources on aspects of food culture from Greek antiquity through the Renaissance. Clearly, these introductory chapters function as *repoussoirs*: they are meant to contextualize and also to set off the main subject. Yet the thinness of the initial chapters contrasts sharply with the more detailed material on the late-seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. A “vegetable renaissance,” for instance, ostensibly followed a medieval era that consigned vegetable cookery to a “marginal role.” (p. 35) Yet Pinkard's discussion fails to consider the consequences of, for example, Carolingian decrees demanding the cultivation of a wide range of grains and vegetables. Nor does it take monastic fast day cooking and monastic vegetarian cooking into account. Nor does the analysis examine, here or elsewhere, the relationship between recommendations in manuscript or print cooking manuals for elites, and what those elites, not to mention other segments of the population, actually cooked and ate.

The readings in the latter half of *A Revolution in Taste* animate a fascinating, and still understudied, canon of primary sources. One hopes that other readings, extensions, and interrogations of this canon will follow.

[1] Such as Raymond Oliver, *Gastronomy of France*, trans. Claude Durrell, ([London]: The Wine and Food Society / World Publishing, 1967) and Anne Willan, *Great Cooks and Their Recipes: From Taillevent to Escoffier* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977; republished 1992).

[2] Works in this broad category include Léo Moulin, *Les liturgies de la table: Une histoire culturelle du manger et du boire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988); Gérard Oberlé, *Les fastes de Bacchus et de Comus, ou, histoire du boire et du manger en Europe, de l'antiquité à nos jours, à travers les livres* (Paris: Belfond, 1989); Jean-Robert Pitte, *Gastronomie française: Histoire et géographie d'une passion* (Paris: Fayard, 1991); Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Chronique de Platine: Pour une gastronomie historique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1992); Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Kenneth Albala, *Food in Early Modern Europe* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003); Patrick Rambourg, *De la cuisine à la gastronomie: Histoire de la table française* (Paris: Louis Audibert, 2005); sections of the *Histoire de l'alimentation* edited by Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1996); my own *Food Culture in France* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007); and Florent Quellier,

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*La Table des Français: Une histoire culturelle (XVe-début XIXe siècle)* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007).

[3] Among the principal published cookbooks dating to the second half of the seventeenth century are *Le cuisinier françois* (Paris: Pierre David, 1651) by François Pierre de La Varenne; *Les Délices de la campagne* (Paris: Pierre des Hayes, 1654) by Nicolas de Bonnefons, who also wrote a treatise on the cultivation of vegetables and fruits; *Le Cuisinier* (Paris: Pierre David, 1656) by Pierre de Lune; *L'Art de bien traiter* (Paris: Jean du Puis, 1674) by L.S.R.; and *Le cuisinier roïal et bourgeois* (Paris: 1691) by François Massialot.

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