

H-France Review Vol. 7 (August 2007), No. 98

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xii + 258pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0226243230; \$22.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0226243249.

Review by Jennifer J. Davis, Furman University.

In an era of proliferating global culinary movements and fusion cuisines of all sorts, it may seem quaint to recall the days when France defined the world's elite cuisine. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's text reminds us to take seriously the lessons of French cuisine's development within France, and its expansion as the world's elite cuisine beyond France. However, the text offers no simple nostalgic lament, nor does it champion a return to some by-gone days. Ferguson argues instead that the French example remains relevant because it valorizes the study of cuisine and culture. The author's enthusiasm for French cuisine does not obscure her critical approach to narrating the story of French cuisine as a foundational myth for both the French nation and the modern world.

The connections that Ferguson traces between cuisine, culture, and identity will inform historians and sociologists of France, and contributes to food studies more generally. But I hope that this text might also engage today's culinary activists. How can a cuisine represent both popular and elite tastes? Can it signify both local roots and cosmopolitan reach? How can a society shape its cuisine? Ferguson's text responds to these questions and explores other important problems. Ultimately, the author asks us to consider "[h]ow and why did French cuisine become the culinary consciousness of the West and, at times, its conscience as well?" (p. 30). An important subtext of this book proposes that French culinary conscience could provide guidance to the rest of the world as it struggles through the consequences of globalization in cuisine, food distribution, and labor. Ferguson is primarily interested in how culture works in general, and finds within French "culinarity" a fascinating alternative model for approaching questions of "cultural construction and the possibilities of resistance, survival and demise, and, perhaps, revival" (p. 8).

Ferguson's text joins recent historians and sociologists of French cuisine in asserting that culinary culture plays a central role in national identity formation.[1] She plumbs the depths of cuisine to reveal social and political ideologies. Following the theoretical framework outlined in Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*, Ferguson finds that "culinary practices in the West, particularly consumption practices, support Elias's hypothesis of an increasing social control dependent on an acute consciousness of others and our dependence on them for a sense of self" (p. 29). Table manners demand constant self-monitoring and ultimately serve to distance a diner from food and desires. However, given the centrality of the "civilizing process" to Ferguson's analysis, this reader would have appreciated a more complete discussion of the broader academic reception of Elias.[2]

[The chapters of *Accounting for Taste* read best as discrete essays on the common themes of French cuisine and identity. The structure testifies to the diverse strands of culinary culture that Ferguson has interwoven throughout this analysis. Even a cuisine as self-consciously unified and homogenous as France's brings together elements from a wide range of regions, classes, religions, and eras. The first chapter, "Culinary Configurations," provides an orientation to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cookbooks that imagined a distinctively French cuisine. Chapter two, "Inventing French Cuisine," credits the nineteenth-century master pastry chef and cookbook author, Marie-Antoine Carême, with

first articulating French culinary distinction and establishing its professional standards. The third chapter, "Readings in a Culinary Culture," surveys the development of gastronomy as a literary field in nineteenth-century France, and evaluates its impact on French letters more generally. In chapter four, "Food Nostalgia," Ferguson narrows the aperture to focus on the representation of food in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, as a window onto the role of cuisine in French national identity. The fifth chapter, "Consuming Passions," presents the results of thirty-one interviews with elite restaurant cooks, cook-owners, and owners in New York City. Ferguson concludes with a meditation on the representation of food and nation in the film, *Babette's Feast: A Fable for Culinary France*. These sketches from key moments in French culinary culture both enlighten and entertain.

Proposing a "geography and genealogy of culinary culture" in France, Ferguson locates the emergence of self-consciously national cuisine in the mid-seventeenth century (p. 3). Louis XIV's France required measures to bind together a fractious kingdom, wracked by over a century of religious warfare and elite rebellions. Cuisine provided one realm in which differences could be set aside, and the fruits of the kingdom united for the elites' pleasure. Ferguson finds that seventeenth-century cookbooks fit the "legislative mode" of this era (p. 37). Cookbook authors outlined the rules, classifications, and organizing principles for preparing and serving elite meals, just as academicians set the standards for the French language, and dramatists established literary forms. Competition between authors set off literary feuds and contributed to an emphasis on new and modern tastes as signs of elite cuisine.

Social distinction constituted the central concern of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cookbooks surveyed by Ferguson. The author contends that in order to create a national cuisine, cooks and diners would in the nineteenth century "bring together the class cuisine of Ancien Régime elites with the geographical spread of products and produce across the whole of France" (p. 47). This assertion ignores two important factors of Ancien Régime society. First, it neglects a generation of scholarship problematizing the presumed rigid social hierarchy of pre-Revolutionary France.^[3] Taste in particular proved to be a fluid currency that circulated between classes rather than marking each in strict boundaries. Second, it fails to attend to the geographic reach of Louis XIV's table and the urban marketplaces.^[4] The expansively national cuisine of Ferguson's nineteenth century was certainly underway well before the Revolution.

Ferguson credits the nineteenth-century pastry cook and author, Marie-Antoine Carême, with the invention of French cuisine as a national mythology. His texts united recipes with political meditations, technical instruction, and exacting artistic standards. Carême was the first celebrity chef, sought by the crowned heads of Europe for his phenomenally detailed architectural centerpieces of sugar.^[5] He outlined a new professional standard for cooks, based on those held by architects and artists. His cookbooks also addressed a broader public, which "in turn justified French cuisine as a national undertaking in place of the more manifestly class-oriented endeavor that it had been under the Ancien Régime" (p. 50). Carême's self-promotion is subordinated to his nationalist agenda, in this analysis, which asserts the accessibility of this form of patriotism demonstrated three times daily.

However, cooks did not form a national culinary culture alone. Diners participated as well. In gastronomy, a field of literature born after the French Revolution, Ferguson locates the "books, not cooks" that created French cuisine (p. 83). This chapter juxtaposes analysis of the famed gastronomes, Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière and Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, alongside two authors better known for platitudes than platters: Charles Fourier and Honoré Balzac. Ferguson highlights the ideals of modernity, democracy, and secularism as represented within France's culinary culture. The author concludes that "the great value of the gastronomic field lies in what it tells us about cuisine in France. This conceptual frame allows us to see exactly what is French about food in France" (p. 109). It also allows the audience to perceive how dramatically those terms shift over time, although this point remains latent in Ferguson's analysis.

Ferguson next provides a more focused literary analysis of food representations in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Here, the potential fault lines within French foodways--city and country, chef and cook, tradition and innovation--were reconfigured as its strengths. Within Proust's narration, cuisine transcended social divisions, emanated from the land and brought those who consumed it back to simpler times.

The final chapter "Consuming Passions" queries, "What of French cuisine today?" Ferguson presents an intriguing portrait of French cuisine's continued relevance in a non-French world capital. The author, along with Sharon Zukin and Jennifer Parker, conducted in-depth interviews in 1991 with thirty-one restaurant chefs, chef-owners, and owners working primarily in New York City. These culinary professionals responded to questions about the role of French cuisine as the world's standard of elite dining, changes over the twentieth century, and the future place it would have among global cuisines. These sources are tremendous, and this reader would have relished a more complete exposition. Ferguson notes the professional impact of restaurant guides and ratings systems and the expansion of celebrity chef-status with multiple magazines and television networks. She traces the culinary education of Americans in a few pages, from eighteenth-century ignorance to twenty-first century obsession, and locates the central role played by French cooks and cuisine in that education. However, the jump from France to the United States is abrupt, requiring nearly another text to provide the background on American culinary culture, or the absence thereof.

No study of French culinary culture would be complete without paying homage to the cult film, *Babette's Feast* (dir. Gabriel Axel, 1987), based on the short story by Isak Dinesen. Set in nineteenth-century rural Denmark, a French female cook arrives eager to take up service to a pair of old-maid sisters. In the film's finale, she prepares an exquisite French meal for the community, forcefully reintroducing physical pleasure and desire into their lives. Ferguson explains, "*Babette's Feast* constructs something of a legend out of French cuisine...The very distance of the film from France, its foreign author and filmmaker, language and setting, heightens our awareness of the constructed nature of the country that is culinary France" (p. 201). Like all ideals, we may never actually encounter that France. But it remains a powerful promise of unity across divisions, connection to the past and the land, and the valorization of this labor as an art.

Ultimately, Ferguson's greatest contribution to the literature on French cuisine resides in her simultaneous celebration of and skepticism towards French culinary. Her text enables us to plumb the depth and complexity of the French culinary mythos, and invites us to interrogate it more closely to understand the social, economic, and political work that such myths perform. In particular, Ferguson's question of how French culinary "internationalization" might aid us in navigating the shoals of present day "globalization" could yield important tools for today's culinary artists and activists. These possibilities prove especially alluring for twenty-first century readers, who recognize that here is another way of organizing foodways that might not pose immediate health risks, contribute to environmental degradation, or depend primarily on illegal underpaid labor forces. French cuisine's long-standing dedication to regional specialties, local foodstuffs, and cuisine as art has much to contribute to the emerging ideals and ethics of cuisine in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

[1] Among the more recent contributions to this literature, see Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000); Amy Trubeck, *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession* (Philadelphia: University of

Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Reynald Abad, *Le Grand Marché: L'approvisionnement alimentaire de Paris sous l'Ancien régime* (Paris: Fayard, 2002); Kolleen Guy, *When Champagne Became French* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Sydney Watts, *Meat Matters: Butchers, Politics and Market Culture in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

[2] Elias has been critiqued for providing an overly processional theory of how civilization advances, for ignoring important national differences through his synthetic European analysis, and for ignoring human agency in long-term processes such as “the growth of the state.” See the discussion of this critique in Lyndal Roper’s *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 161. See also Anna Bryson’s critique of Elias in *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 10-11.

[3] On this point, see the discussion in Sarah Maza’s *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 27-36.

[4] Reynald Abad, *Le grand marché: L'approvisionnement alimentaire de Paris sous l'Ancien régime* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

[5] Paul Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill and Self-Promotion in Paris during the Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Jennifer J. Davis Furman University jennifer.davis@furman.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (August 2007), No. 98

ISSN 1553-9172