

H-France Review Vol. 8 (August 2008), No. 98

Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Good Bread is Back: A Contemporary History of French Bread, The Way It Is Made, And The People Who Make It*. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2006 [Originally published as *Le retour du bon pain: une histoire contemporaine du pain, de ses techniques et de ses hommes*. Paris: Perrin, 2002]. 368 pp. Images, tables, glossary, notes, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8223-3833-5.

Review by Steve Zdatny, West Virginia University.

Steven Kaplan grew up in New York City and presumably was raised on bread as fluffy and white as a Barbara Bush hairdo. Somewhere along the line, his life was deflected and he became the world's greatest authority on the history of French bread.[1] His newest book *French Bread is Back*, originally written in French and translated into English, makes it clear that bread is no mere academic interest for Kaplan. It is less the subject of an academic study than the hero in a dramatic tale of fall and resurrection; indeed, *French Bread* is not even really a history book—at least according to those obscure authorities who give books their Library of Congress numbers and who placed it among the cookbooks (TX769.K28713 2006). Above all, it is a call to arms, a tract “to get the silent majority of [French] consumers to examine their bread-eating habits, or, as dynamic bakers put it, to rethink their priorities” (p. 321). Enough of insipid baguettes and tasteless pains de campagne: “It is time to draw the line” (p. 323)!

Kaplan begins his story by noting the sharp drop in the daily consumption of bread in the twentieth century, from 750 grams per capita at the beginning to a mere 150 grams at the end. Bread was not simply displaced by the possibility of a more diversified diet in a richer country. It was murdered by a decline in quality that Kaplan considers “a betrayal of a certain idea of France” (p. 2). This is all the more significant because of bread's special status in the French diet and imagination—not only nutritionally essential but sacred: “a hyphen between life and death” (p. 6). Bread is public order, and bread is revolution.

The first chapter takes readers into the “hellish rhythm” of the bake room to consider the production process. In fact, like a reporter going underground, Kaplan himself worked in some of these “dark dungeons,” the better to know his subject. He explains that the principal change in bread-making from the Revolution to the Fifth Republic was the abandonment of the sourdough method of fermentation, because of the enormous effort and time it required, and the search for shortcuts. Kaplan also provides—and I suppose this is what helped put the book in the baking section of the Library of Congress—a point-by-point description of the arduous process by which bread is made: from kneading to *pointage*, pre-shaping, shaping, and baking. Having gotten bread in and out of the oven, the author then ponders what makes it good or bad, undaunted by the difficulty of measuring quality. Bread should look good, because “a manifestly ugly bread engenders mistrust” (p. 45) But that's hardly enough. It has to have the right feel in the mouth, the right aroma, and especially the right taste. To talk about taste, Kaplan proposes a “system [based] on a good blend of humility and cheek” (p. 52), with a vocabulary and scoring grid like those used for wine. The one thing you *cannot* count on for evaluating good bread, Kaplan notes, is the judgment of consumers; take, for instance, the preference for warm loaves, despite their inferior “organoleptic quality” (p. 60).

“Bread: The Double Crisis” returns to the “desacralization” of bread and the vicissitudes of its consumption, strongly up in the nineteenth century and down in the twentieth. At first, people ate more bread as they could afford it. Eventually, however, income overtook the taste for more and more bread. An industrial society expended fewer calories in labor. Vegetables, fruit, cheese, and meat supplanted cereals in the diet. It didn’t help that medical opinion sometimes asserted that “ordinary bread was harmful to one’s health” or even downright poisonous (pp. 67-68). Naturally, every generation complained that its bread wasn’t as good as what its grandparents enjoyed.

As bread culture hit bottom in the early 1980s, bakers fought back. The most interesting and revealing of these initiatives was the Confédération Nationale de la Boulangerie’s organization in 1983 of an “Estates General” of bakers with the two aims of restoring bread to its privileged place in the French diet and defending *artisans-boulangers* against the threat from bakery chains and supermarkets. The Confederation thereby pulled an old trick out of the artisanal bag. Historically, when petty producers can’t compete by price, and when consumers don’t seem to notice (or to mind) the difference in quality, they wave the flag of moral economy and intrinsic Frenchness: “Quality cannot be invented; it has to be *restored*.” And who is better placed to restore the historic goodness of French bread, the hypermarché or the friendly neighborhood baker? *Tout commence en politique et finit en mystique*, to invert Péguy’s famous lament.

In the decline of quality, white bread was the chief culprit. Kaplan reminds his readers of the historically privileged status of white bread and cites the story of a country priest at the end of the nineteenth century who offers a piece of good dark bread to a beggar who claims to be an unemployed worker: “You can keep your bread,” the beggar scolds the priest. “Workers without jobs are already unhappy enough, we don’t have to let you insult us and treat us like animals—because that’s dog’s bread you have there” (p. 105). After World War II, traditional prejudice was reinforced by memories of the awful dark bread of the Occupation and by modern, mechanical methods that made white bread easy and cheap. But the pasty, insipid product on bakery shelves was killing the public appetite: When white bread ruled, artisans suffered.

At the heart of the problem was the new competition from industrial bakers, against which *artisan-boulangers* struggled to find a route to survival. In the past, notes Kaplan, when the state supervised the trade closely, bakers did not worry very much about competition. State regulation had its inconveniences, but it saved bakers from the uncertainties of the free market. Conversely, the development of new forms of production and distribution in post-1945 France posed a mortal threat to this situation of comfortable mediocrity. The Great Leap Forward was frozen dough that allowed fresh bread to be baked in supermarkets and bake-off terminals, and thereby squeezed artisanal bakers between shrinking demand and growing competition. The *petits boulangers* replied with a discourse that, as Kaplan remarks, both echoed the opposition to Turgot and anticipated the anti-globalist arguments of José Bové: a call for “honest,” not “unfair” competition and a contention that, “to the extent that it threatened the very existence of artisanal baking... and... by degrees... was destroying a form of society and the way of life it supported, any competition was fundamentally illegitimate and tragic...” (p. 129). As a matter of fact, according to the author, “industrial” bakers were producing pretty good bread. Carrefour engaged the celebrated young *boulangier* Dominique Saibron to revise its baking operation, and Francis Halder, the entrepreneurial genius behind the Paul chain of bakeries, turned a superior product out of his growing number of ovens.

Their declining situation led bakers to look to the public authorities for succor. As Kaplan points out, bakers have always had a complex relationship with the state. On the one hand, the two shared a common interest in the food supply and a mutual fear of public disorder. To be sure, the politics of bread was very complicated in the Old Regime and remained so after the fall of the Bourbons—the “Maximum” was an Old Regime policy, after all—and until “good bread at a just price” no longer decided whether people lived or died. On the other hand, the state wanted sufficient supplies at a fair price,

while bakers counted on state management to provide them with a minimal living. At the same time, they wanted to earn as much as they could. Even as bakers chafed under price controls, therefore, what they really wanted was not a free market but *high* fixed prices, which the state naturally resisted. In the Fifth Republic, without the old rationale for price controls on bread, bakers and public authorities struggled to find a new relationship. Bread prices were freed in 1978, re-fixed in 1981, freed again (with a bakers' "agreement on moderation" in 1983), and liberated definitively in 1987. "The transition from *dirigisme* to liberty," Kaplan writes, "seemed hardly less difficult at the end of the twentieth century than during Turgot's era" (p. 182).

In the end, however, neither party was willing to break off relations entirely. Or rather, to be precise, the artisan bakers represented by the Confederation, happy enough to charge higher prices, still wanted state protection from industrial rivals. Kaplan here tells a classic French tale of small producers, pessimistic about their ability to compete, looking to the public authorities to give them some sort of shelter against the stresses of "(wholesale, fundamentalist) free-market liberalism" (p. 186). True to the history of these relations, the Balladur government responded with the so-called bread decree of September 1993. The decree set up, in effect, official, and therefore, privileged categories of bread. It was an exercise in marketable nostalgia, packed with mystifications and moralisms that aimed "to confer a sacred character on artisanal work" and to redeem "a 'noble product' degraded and sullied by impostors and profiteers" (p. 191). In other words, it gave artisanally produced bread a quality that supermarkets and bake-off terminals could not match: Frenchness.

This was hardly the end of the story. For one thing, the decree—certainly compared to eighteenth-century precedents—was not very rigorously policed. For another, it did not address a host of the Confederation's other demands: to impose an obligatory weekly closing, to drive out "unqualified interlopers practicing the profession without legitimacy," and to prohibit the discounting of bread "at a ridiculous price" (p. 201). To make their point, 5,000 bakers took to the streets in May 1995, dressed in professional garb and carrying placards that read: "Down with the big box stores, their bread is disgusting" and "Bakers mean jobs; big box stores mean disaster" (p. 202). This "conversation" continued until artisan-bakers found a true champion in Jacques Chirac's first Premier Jean-Pierre Raffarin, whose decree of December 1995 threw his considerable weight behind privileges like reserving the title "baker" for *artisans-boulangers*. The Conseil d'État annulled the decree a year later, in the face of protests from the Confederation: "We are not backward corporatists' demanding 'arbitrary protections,' the Confederation insisted, but 'we demand a law affirming the identity of our profession on unchallengeable legal grounds'" (p. 206). Although the pleas of *petits patrons* usually found conservative ears more sympathetic than socialist ones, the Jospin government passed its own protective legislation for artisan bakers in 1998. The 35-hour law that took effect in 2002 put an end to that honeymoon, however.

In the end, salvation came not from a benevolent state but from a widespread adjustment to new market conditions and the efforts of a small group of enterprising individuals, who began to give the bread-eating public more of what it wanted. In the first instance, the millers undertook a reorganization of the baking trade, building their own networks of bakers to whom they supplied, on a more or less exclusive basis, flour, capital, and business advice. Kaplan supplies a bit of historical background to the tense relations between millers and bakers. Millers had a traditional reputation for "evil, corruption, and infamy," and their dealings with bakers were further poisoned by the clash of interests on either side of the flour exchange. The eighteenth-century division of labor made the miller an employee of the baker, but the nineteenth century reversed this, leaving the baker little more than "the miller's man" (p. 215).

This continued into the twentieth century, and in the 1980s millers began to use this leverage to bring some order and stability to a trade that seemed to have lost its way. Beginning with Banette in the early 1980s, they led "the campaign for the return of good bread" by imposing discipline and quality on the bakers who joined the group. They were especially effective in establishing the loaf "in the French

tradition”—a superior, old-fashioned bread created by the decree of September 1993. The thousands of *boulangeries* that belonged to Banette, Rétrodor, and the other networks were not franchises, and they were not exactly controlled by the millers. Bakers who did not produce bread of the expected standard, however, were invited to “withdraw voluntarily” from the group.

At the level of individual genius, good bread returned because of the work of visionary bakers like Eric Kayser, born into a dynasty of *boulangers*, and Dominique Saibron, the working-class son of a boilermaker. These two superb artisans coexist today somewhat jealously on the rue Monge, the old commercial street running on the Left Bank from the Place Maubert to the Gobelins. Their respectful but sharp competition is of a piece with the rich history of bread on the rue Monge, part of an old *pâté* of solidarity and rivalry that has long beset neighborhood bakers trying to establish themselves while fighting labor troubles, tetchy clients, and each other. Kayser and Saibron are joined in the capital today by other rising stars “who reject the trivialization of bread” and toil “in the name of self-respecting French people who care about their patrimony” (p. 293).

In sum, Professor Kaplan’s new book is a tasty meditation on the many pleasures of good bread, wrapped in an object lesson on the evolution of artisanal production. Many readers who do not share the author’s passion for the technical aspects of breadmaking will nonetheless be impressed by it. And anyone who has ever stood in a French bakery savoring the scent and admiring the array of delectable brown loaves will be heartened by his optimistic conclusion that good bread will always drive out bad. It is, as Kaplan might say, a delicious book with a beautifully gilded crust and a pearly, chewy crumb.

(A coda: It seems that Professor Kaplan is not alone in discovering that good bread is back, or even in the words he uses to describe it. At a Panera in Hagerstown, Maryland, I found a brochure touting “Crust, Crumb and Craft: All the Elements of Great Tasting Bread,” including illustrations and language that could have come directly out of Kaplan’s book: a sketch of skilled hands scoring the bread and a description, to take one example, of a country loaf with “a crisp, slightly blistered crust with an open, elastic texture [and] a soft, wine-like aroma [that] hints at the subtle nutty taste of our artisan starter.” It seems to prove, if I might re-paraphrase Péguy, that *tout commence en mystique et finit en marketing*.)

## NOTES

[1] Among Kaplan’s contributions to the history of bread, bakers, and consumers in France are *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade During the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); and *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question, 1700-1775* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). His most recent book, on bread’s “dark years,” is *Le pain maudit: Retour sur la France des années oubliées, 1945-1958* (Paris: Fayard, 2008). And for those interested more in the taste of bread than its history, *Cherchez le pain: Guide des Meilleures Boulangeries de Paris* (Paris: Plon, 2004).

Steve Zdatny  
West Virginia University  
Steve.zdatny@mail.wvu.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of

publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172