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E. C. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. xii + 366 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00/£29.00 (cl). ISBN-10 0-226-76886-4 (cl); ISBN-10: 0-226-76888-0 (eb).

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“I avow that my stomach does not cope well with *nouvelle cuisine*,” wrote Voltaire to a friend in 1765.

“I can’t eat a meat loaf composed of turkey, hare and rabbit which they try to make me take for a single meat. I don’t like pigeon *à la crapaudine* (flattened and grilled to look like a toad), or bread without its crust. I drink wine in moderation, and I find those people who eat without drinking, and don’t even know what they are eating, very strange” (p. 263).

The seventy-year-old notorious hypochondriac Voltaire worried constantly about his food and health, and it is easy to dismiss this rant as part of his daily *kvetching*. Not so E. C. Spary. In this elegantly written and rigorously researched study, Spary convincingly demonstrates that Enlightenment philosophes and their readers not only worried about healthy eating, but subjected eating, digestion and defecation, as well as meals, manners, and diets, to the same scientific rigor and moral scrutiny as in better-known works of natural history and belles-lettres.

A noted historian of science who published *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Spary here takes on the ambitious agenda of demonstrating the intersection of the history of science and the cultural history of food in Enlightenment ideology and society. Paris intellectuals did not simply complain about their bodies. In Spary’s telling, they used eating as a kind of experimental laboratory to understand the nature of food and the biological processes that resulted from eating. In this sense, understanding the body through control of one’s diet could unlock the secrets of natural life. Correspondingly, experts in chemistry and physiology commented on recipes, diet, and favored cocktails. “The eating self (p. 259),” as Spary calls it, did not relapse into solipsism, but explored the natural world.

This learned and entertaining study features the philosophe as foodie. At the heart of this fascinating story is *nouvelle cuisine*. Hard to define in part because it entered the eighteenth century already a pejorative term, *nouvelle cuisine* meant cooking with innovative new sauces and spices, creating exotic tastes that often disguised the meat or vegetable at the center of the dish. As the term implies, the whole point of *nouvelle cuisine* was to disrupt the traditional ways urban Frenchmen ate in France, moving food products closer to the world of fashion. [1] For Spary, *nouvelle cuisine* “was a sign of contemporary concern about the consumption of substances that had the power to overturn custom and tradition” (p. 14).

Spary’s careful research and spritely writing are exhibited already in chapter one, “Intestinal Struggles,” which concerns digestion itself. Focusing on the obscure but fascinating Jansenist physician, Philippe Hecquet (1661-1737), Spary situates the discussion of digestion within Catholic theological concerns, such as when physicians advised ill patients to violate Lent’s usually restrictive diet. For Jansenists like

Hecquet, the mysteries of transforming food substances into living human tissue were so profound as to constitute evidence of “God’s continual presence within human bodies” (p. 29).

Chapter two, “From Curiosi to Consumers” reminds readers that virtually all of the innovative ingredients used in nouvelle cuisine revolved around the new foods and spices available through trade from the New World and secured to Europe through mercantilist policies and empire. At the heart of this story are, of course, sugar, tea, coffee, and chocolate. This theme continues in the next chapter, “The Place of Coffee,” focusing on the Paris café as a site of both coffee sipping and Enlightenment sociability. Both chapters emphasize the extent to which coffee especially became not simply a central preoccupation in the daily diet, but of special interest to alert writers in particular, who discussed its benefits and harmful side effects. Spary makes a good case for viewing coffee as “a defining drug of Enlightenment” (p. 109).

Chapter four, “Distilled Learning,” is perhaps the book’s most original section, making ingenious use of a weekly Paris newspaper, the *Avantcoureur*. Focusing on some forty advertisements by food makers placed in the journal between 1761 and 1773, Spary cleverly comments on the intersection of science and commerce, or more precisely, on pharmaceutical chemistry and the new craze for distilled liqueurs over traditional wine and beer. How else are we to explain, for example, the fact that half of the material in Antoine Baumé’s *Elemens de pharmacie* explores distilling “chocolate, quince jelly, cherry wine, and barley sugar” (p. 165). In 1768, the *Avantcoureur* advertised for sale Baumé’s own invention, an aerometer, which measured the alcoholic content of liqueurs. His efforts soon landed him a place in the prestigious Académie Royale des Sciences.

In “The Philosophical Palate,” Spary moves away from scientists towards the core of the French Enlightenment Republic of Letters, observing the philosophes reflect on eating. Spary shows how Parisian men of letters were interested in cooking, and like Voltaire, held strong opinions about nouvelle cuisine. The philosophes could not help but think philosophically about what they were eating. “Nouvelle cuisine,” writes Spary, “was a literary, somatic, and gustatory practice drawing its scientific credentials from the claim that chemistry and geometry provided the best models for representing true events within the body” (p. 240).

The focus on the Paris philosophes and their allies reaches its climax in the final chapter, “Rules of Regimen,” which itself is a small and precious jewel of original scholarship. Here we find the dark side of nouvelle cuisine: overeating, too much coffee, dependence on sweet cakes, not to mention the liqueurs, all of which threaten to overwhelm the fragile body. Mme Geoffrin, the salon leader, put herself on fashionable diets to change her overindulgence of saucy foods. She and others sought advice from some of Europe’s best-known physicians. The chapter features Swiss doctors Théodore Tronchin and Samuel Auguste Tissot, whose letters from would-be patients are archived in the municipal libraries of Geneva and Lausanne respectively. Tronchin and Tissot offered a Rousseauian response to nouvelle cuisine (Spary reminds us that Julie quits drinking coffee in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*). The doctors emphasized a more natural diet, which meant turning away from exotic New World products. They advocated locally sourced food gentle on the stomach, digested in small quantities. Above all, they argued that large meals should be avoided. Sometimes the letters to Tronchin and Tissot took on a confessional tone. Spary brings us one from Madame de la Ville Gille, who did not have the resilience to forego coffee: “Every day usually made Me go to Stool, My Physician Has forbidden it, I admit that I have Not yet the Courage to Prevent Myself” (p. 285). If we learned only recently that the restaurant was born in late Enlightenment Paris, in Spary’s work we discover that the diet fad had its beginnings here too.[2]

Eating the Enlightenment, then, is an admirable and important book, a terrifically researched study, and a delight to read. It is also, however, a casualty of its own ambition because it tries to be much more than what I have described so far. Layered over these topics are unconvincing claims about the links between

food and political culture. One can, I think, appreciate this book's very real contribution to scholarship and nonetheless contest some of its arguments.

"My argument in *Eating the Enlightenment*," writes Spary on the first page, "is that by attending to the history of an everyday activity such as eating, we are able to understand both 'science' and 'Enlightenment' in new ways." In recent years, major Enlightenment studies have sought to root the movement in cosmopolitan or particular national traditions. Scholars have been preoccupied with discovering whether, for example, the Enlightenment in Edinburgh was part of the same phenomenon going on in Paris. On the one hand, John Robertson and Jonathan Israel separately argued for a unified European Enlightenment in which books, letters, and ideas effortlessly crossed borders. On the other hand, J. G. A. Pocock and others asserted an Enlightenment rooted in national or local traditions.[3] Spary ignores discussion of the nature of the Enlightenment, with a resulting confusion about what exactly it is she is studying. For example, given the book's subtitle, "Food and the Sciences in Paris," one might be forgiven for thinking that she limits her inquiry to the Enlightenment in France per se. Many of her primary sources are indeed rooted in Paris, but many important documents are not. Tronchin, Tissot, and Voltaire are three intellectuals prominently featured in this book who rarely lived in Paris. The bulk of the correspondents and archival document making Spary's study so intriguing often came from outside the capital.

It is not clear whether Spary is hoping to make a case for the Enlightenment in general or whether she thinks of what happened in Paris as a distinct case study. To what extent, for example, was the café a site for Enlightenment production not only in Paris but also in London and Amsterdam? Likewise, the four "drug foods" studied by historians such as Sidney Mintz (sugar, chocolate, tea, and coffee) affected most western European cities during the eighteenth century. Were French elites the only ones to write about them?[4] Reading Mintz and Israel makes one wonder whether the French were following the English and Dutch rather than forging a new way of eating. Some gesture towards a comparative framework, if only in the introduction, would have given more clarity to Spary's purpose in choosing Paris as her focus.

Spary makes large claims linking food reflections with political criticism, but the specific evidence sometimes falls short of its promise. Opening chapter one, for example, Spary issues this claim: "French physicians and their clients regarded the stomach as a somatic locus where digestive, moral, and even political upsets manifested themselves..." (p. 17). Her evidence comes from the article "Digestion" from the *Encyclopédie*, and she offers the following quotation: "I dare say no sort of food stuff exists which some of these difficult stomachs do not desire [appeter] & digest by preference & to the exclusion of all others. Most peculiar oddities have been observed in this respect, & even contradictions of a sort: one such stomach, for example, digests melon & ham very well, but will not digest peach & salt beef, even though there is undoubtedly more analogy between ham & salt beef than between melon & hame, &c..." (p. 17). I cannot perceive a moral or political dimension to digestion anywhere in this long quote.

Chapter one follows a parallel track of Jansenism's development from a distinct theological school to a political opposition. Since Hecquet published his articles on digestion in a Jansenist outlet, Spary argues that Jansenists were using digestion to mount a political argument. "The digestion controversy closely parallels the fate of Jansenism as described by [Dale] Van Kley," that is, transforming "into an important political focus of opposition to absolutism" (p. 48). Showing that two topics appear in the same periodical, however, is not the same thing as demonstrating that they were part of one unified ideological project. Even the Jansenists could worry about digestion without it becoming a pretense for political attack.

Spary insists that "writing about cuisine was thus always a political act, insofar as it was a discourse about progress" (p. 234). For Voltaire and Diderot, "health became an epistemological and micropolitical strategy of self-construction" (p. 287). This "turn toward health and the natural constituted a

micropolitics of the self..." (p. 289). Did contemporaries recognize eating as political? Among the most poignant parts of the book are where Spary shows Voltaire, Diderot, and others worrying about what they ate the previous evening. Although Voltaire and Diderot were candid with their friends about the foods that made them sick, such topics were rarely a main feature of their published writings. When Diderot featured a physician-scientist in *Le Rêve d'Alembert*, Dr. Bordeu spoke to Mlle de l'Espinasse about inter-species mating; they ignored food. When Diderot did give voice to a particular human organ in *Les bijoux indiscrets*, it was not the stomach. If Spary is right about the importance of food science to the philosophes, one should see that concern displayed in at least some of their major writings.

In the case of Jean Jacques Rousseau, one certainly can see a concern with healthy eating. *Emile* (1762) makes food a key ingredient in Rousseau's recipe for social criticism:

"One of the poofs that the taste of meat is not natural to man is the indifference that children have for that kind of food and the preference they all give to vegetable foods, such as dairy products, pastry, fruits, etc. It is, above all, important not to denature this primitive taste and make children carnivorous." [5]

Rousseau was one writer who made reflections on food into a fully political critique. Unfortunately *Emile* is curiously ignored by Spary, and there are no quotes from it, even though, implicitly, Spary recognizes it as a masterpiece that incorporates many themes emphasized in her book. For example, when discussing Mme de Genlis, Spary notes that she "raised both boys on a regimen...she derived from Rousseau's educational treatise *Emile*" (p. 289). Rousseau's echo is here, while the master himself oddly escapes attention.

Spary explains that her analysis amounts to a "poststructuralist reading of the ways in which individuals employ foods for self-fashioning, understanding such activities as part of a dialectic between agency and authority" (p. 295). Enlightenment philosophes were bewildered by the introduction of new products such as coffee, tea, chocolate, and sugar, just like consumers everywhere in eighteenth-century Western Europe. It is no accident that contemporaries identified the colonies producing these products to be the most profitable elements in a surging European economy. In Spary's treatment, any French worry about the new drug foods concerned the health and proper digestion of "the eating self" rather than the labor conditions that often produced the critical elements of the nouvelle cuisine. In that sense, it is hard to see how eating became politicized at all. "The act of swallowing one substance rather than another was itself a micropolitical decision..." (p. 295). Perhaps if this had been the case in the eighteenth century, it could be a useful precedent today.

NOTES

[1] *Nouvelle cuisine* was not only for the very rich, but permeated European urban society, according to Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially chapter four.

[2] Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[3] John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); J. G. A. Pocock, "Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of Their History," *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (2008): 83-96; *The Enlightenment in National Context*, eds., Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[4] Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

[5] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 153.

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