

---

H-France Review Vol. 13 (January 2013), No. 2

Sean Takats, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2011. xi + 203pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13: 978-1-4214-0283-3 (hb; alk. pb). ISBN-10:1-4214-0283-1 (hb; alk. pb).

Review by Kathryn Norberg, University of California, Los Angeles.

At a time when celebrity chefs write their memoirs and star in TV shows, it is hard to imagine that cooks were once despised and neglected. Eighteenth-century France was just such a time and Sean Takats' book, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France*, describes the cooks' lowly status and their struggle to rise above it. Takats is interested in "cooks, not food" (p. 3) and his book has more in common with recent work on writers and seamstresses than it does with studies of the restaurant or the creation of *cuisine moderne*. As his title indicates, Takats focuses on the "expert cooks," that is the cooks who claimed "expertise" and who "sought to establish themselves as a profession and used the tools of the Enlightenment to do so" (p. 2).

Studying cooks is not easy for cooks were extremely elusive in the eighteenth century. They did not belong to a guild, so we have no guild records to help define them. Like domestic servants, they operated in the largely undocumented realm of the family and entertaining. Just finding cooks is hard, but Takats does so by deploying a "multifaceted," "indirect" approach which is both ingenious and informative (p. 8). Along with classic texts like cookbooks, Takats uses material sources like kitchen architecture and household accounts to establish a profile of the expert cook, male or female, Parisian or provincial.

Especially important to establishing an identity for cooks is Takats' analysis of the *affiches* or employment ads published in Paris, Toulouse, Metz and Bordeaux. In the *affiches*, cooks offered their services and touted their talents, while employers specified just what they wanted in a cook. Takats finds that cooks were very different from other domestics. They were more skilled and better paid. Despite considerable variation in pay, cooks earned as much as 1000 pounds per annum in elite houses. Cooks also tended to be more literate than fellow servants and they sometimes spoke several foreign languages. Cooks were mobile, moving from household to household and sometimes moving up when the occasion arose. A hierarchy ruled cooking and marked the progression from unskilled *enfant de cuisine* to the lofty, highly paid *maître d'hôtel* of an aristocratic home. Because they were not governed by a guild, cooks could move up in the hierarchy by moving from house to house, acquiring new skills as they went and adding to their expertise. They were, quite literally, a profession on the way up.

Despite (or maybe because of) their superior qualities and responsibilities, cooks were distrusted. Cooks handled large sums of money: the man who cooked for Controller-General

Calonne spent more than 7000 pounds a month and over 36,000 pounds during the summer of 1787 when the Assembly of Notables met. Cooks spent lots of money and were therefore suspected of robbing their employers. Cooks also had superior numeracy because they needed to keep detailed accounts. Takats makes particularly good use of the elaborate kitchen accounts preserved in the T series in the Archives Nationales which display the cook's bookkeeping expertise. But detailed accounts only raised the suspicion in eighteenth-century minds that cooks were cheating their employers. Worse yet, cooks

might poison their masters whether through ignorance or malice, because they worked with perishable foods that could infect and kill.

Even the space in which cooks labored, the kitchen, made them unworthy. Using the writing of architects like Jean François Blondel and Nicolas Le Camus de Mezières, Takats discovers that kitchens were considered places of danger and corruption in the eighteenth century. Unpleasant odors issued from the kitchen, so architects positioned them far away from the main house or beneath it in the lowest basements to spare the master's nose. Kitchens also harbored rot and corruption. The stink from rotten fish and meat might escape, and the kitchen's waste water was a particular concern. Le Camus de Mezières prescribed the use of subterranean drains to dump the infected liquids far from the main house. But material detritus was only half the problem. There was also the "human effluvia"—tradesmen and servants—who might contaminate the household with their noise and ungoverned lusts (p. 48). Using contemporary prints, Takats argues that eighteenth-century men eroticized the female cook and imagined that she carried on illicit sexual relations with the tradesmen who brought food and supplies to her unsupervised kitchen. Thus everything about the cooks—where they worked, the substances they handled and even their skilled bookkeeping—undermined the cooks' status and diminished their respectability.

Against this common prejudice, cooks struggled "to elevate their trade to a profession" (p. 3). They did so largely by writing cookbooks. After a long hiatus between 1680 and 1729, cookbooks reappeared in the 1730s and in greater numbers and at cheaper prices than ever before. In these new cookbooks, religion played no role. Recipes were no longer listed according to Catholic dietary restrictions, i.e. "fat" and "lean" dishes for particular days in the religious calendar. Now recipes were arranged alphabetically or, Takats maintains, according to "nature," that is under the rubrics, fowl, fish or vegetable (p. 113). At the same time, cookbook authors inscribed the development of cooking within the "arc of civilization," arguing that civilization brought with it better cooking and French cooking excelled all others. The cooks also made claims for their own expertise, providing not just recipes but an "ordered" theory of cooking that "marked the transition from practice to knowledge" (p. 109). No longer was the cook just a reflection of his patrons' good taste. Now, the cook was an independent expert, who used print to assert his position as an arbiter of taste and who also laid claim to the authority of science.

Takats devotes a final chapter to the cooks' assertion that they could contribute to good health. The notion was not new, but eighteenth-century cookbook authors, like François Marin and Menon went much further than their predecessors in asserting their power to affect bodies. Emboldened by scientific investigation of the functioning of the stomach and the tongue, they claimed that cooking could affect the health, appetite, taste and even the spirit (p. 121). Menon even demanded that the cooks be recognized and respected as significant contributors to health only slightly less skilled than physicians (p. 119). The cooks' pretensions backfired, raising a firestorm of protest from physicians who, like the cooks, were intent on advancing their profession. But these claims, though poorly received in some quarters, demonstrated that the cooks knew how to deploy "the tools of the Enlightenment," that is print and science, to advance their cause.

Did the cooks succeed in creating respect for their profession? Takats says that, by 1750, "a completely different understanding of the cook's role as arbiter of taste held sway" (p. 114). But he provides little specific evidence beyond the cookbooks. In his conclusion, he emphasizes resistance to the cooks' pretensions and leaves us wondering if cooks did in fact get the respect they sought. One sometimes feels that the cooks themselves are absent from their story, especially in the latter part of the book. One would especially have liked to know more about the cookbook authors, but they like most cooks may have left no documents.

Still, Takats's argument that "cooks occupied an important role in eighteenth-century intellectual life" is important (p. 148). Successful or not, these practitioners of a mechanical art made themselves visible to

the public and demanded respect (pp. 11-12). The Enlightenment provided the tools: print culture, science and a desire to theorize and rationalize all kinds of knowledge including the “mechanical” knowledge. Thanks to Takats’s study, we can see that the Enlightenment was “significantly more expansive and more inclusive” than previously believed (p. 4).

Kathryn Norberg  
University of California, Los Angeles  
[knorberg@ucla.edu](mailto:knorberg@ucla.edu)

Copyright © 2013 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 edistribution/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