
H-France Review Vol. 2 (November 2002), No. 116

Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Harvard Historical Studies, 135) Paperback edition. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. vii + 325 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$16.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-674-00685-2.

Review by Kolleen M. Guy, University of Texas at San Antonio.

In a vivid passage from *Physiologie du goût ou méditations du gastronomie transcendante* (Reprint, 1879), the famous gastronome Brillat-Savarin recounts how he and his French comrades upheld national honor against a surly British planter from Jamaica who would dare turn the restaurant into a battlefield. On a tip from a sympathetic *restaurateur*, Brillat-Savarin learnt that his English dining partner had given “special directions about the wines and spirits, his intention being to test our [French] drinking powers, for the big-mouthed man was sure he could himself put Frenchmen under the table.” National character would be tested in the most French of all modern institutions—the restaurant dining room. The Frenchmen, assuming the culinary superiority that Brillat-Savarin claimed as part of their patrimony, cleverly avoid the trap (with the assistance of the amenable *restaurateur*) and watch as the dastardly Mr. Wilkinson and his companions, after an orgy of consumption, pass out under the table in a slurred chorus of “Rule Britannia.” France is triumphant.

Brillat-Savarin, a typical representative of the romantic age of French gastronomy, recognized distinctive ingredients of French identity: the supremacy of French cuisine and a unique French *savoir vivre* connected with the restaurant. What is lost to the modern reader of this tale is how strange and wonderful this new “battlefield”—the restaurant—once was. In her award-winning work, Rebecca L. Spang reminds us that the existence of the restaurant is such a natural part of modern life that it has largely become banal. With writing that is witty and engaging, Spang seeks to explain the historic process that has turned the once exotic restaurant into its now ubiquitous, modern institution. This pioneering work re-writes the established historical canon on cuisine, dining, and gastronomy by examining the varied social and cultural constructs that have cloaked the oddity of the restaurant in natural attire. No longer must we be content, for example, with the tired tale of the restaurant’s genesis with dispossessed chefs, cast out of aristocratic kitchens by the French Revolution, scurrying to fill new bellies in post-revolutionary Paris. Spang demonstrates that the restaurant was something to be consumed, a healthy consommé, before it actually became a place to consume. This highly original work thus marks a radical departure in a field of inquiry long dominated by antiquarians and food enthusiasts interested in lively dining anecdotes, pithy phrases by self-styled taste professionals, and the recovery of long-forgotten recipes.

Spang is not the first to note France’s special relationship to food and dining. There has been abundant work, beginning with the Annales school, on alimentation and concrete food practices. One of the most notable early works on sites of consumption was *Mangeur du XIXe siècle* by philosopher-historian Jean-Paul Aron. In this 1974 work, Aron proposed to offer a social history of the Parisian restaurant. Making use of rich anecdotal history, such as the excerpt cited above, Aron’s account reflected the views of the nineteenth-century gastronomic society of chefs and articulate French gastronomes. His work provided new information about the culinary arts and did much to prod historians to re-examine the gastronomic literature so coveted by food enthusiasts and scorned by scholars. As Spang correctly points out, the

work of Aron and others that followed provided astute insights into gastronomic society but, in the final analysis, offered little more than historical guidebooks to long vanished restaurants. Restaurants were “reduced to a frame around intrinsically valuable works of culinary art.” Indeed, the French restaurant was so encrusted with myths of national genius that few scrutinized the historic evolution of the unique culinary theater that emerged in the decades straddling the French Revolution. “Past histories of French dining,” as Spang notes in her introduction, often treat the restaurant “largely as an icon of French gastronomic genius or as a major factor in the consolidation of the nation’s ‘culinary patrimony’” (p. 6).

Well grounded in archival research and lavishly documented, Spang’s work exemplifies the new cultural history at its best. Spang approaches the space of the restaurant as a cultural artifact with an ever-shifting cultural and political identity in the period roughly between 1760 and 1820. The restaurant began as a semi-medicinal restorative for the man of taste or the man of letters whose struggle to digest difficult ideas left no energy for digesting food (p. 40). He could be joined by “the delicate” woman whose “profound mental and physical laziness” led her to suffer equally from a touchy tummy. Together over their *consommé*—in private, mirrored rooms with intimate tables—the diners could repair their fragile health. By the eve of the Revolution, gentle restoratives were gradually crowded together with more elaborate dishes on menus. The savvy *restaurateur* found a market with not only those “weak of chest” but “any and all who delighted in the possibility that careful attention would be paid to their meals” (p. 65). Building on previous links with healthful foods, the restaurant elaborated a new code of service and personalized treatment that included flexible mealtimes, printed menus, separate tables, individualized meals, fine furnishings, and “distractions for the spirit” (p. 75). Many of these aspects of restaurant culture persisted over time. Indeed, by the 1820s and 1830s, the restaurant served a social function familiar to modern readers—satiating “private appetites in a public space.”

Aron noted in his study that it was “à table that the nineteenth century began to define itself; it is à table that business deals are made, ambitions declared, marriages arranged” and, in this way, consumption became a part of emerging nineteenth-century public rituals.^[1] The restaurant thus seemingly would be an ideal starting point for examining the relationship between the private and public. Inspired by the work of Jürgen Habermas, historians have examined how these new physical spaces—urban cafés, salons hosted by aristocratic women, and other semi-public institutions—provided novel opportunities for interaction, carving out a civic public sphere with modern frameworks for political participation. Spang notes, however, that the “restaurant seems, for most historians’ purposes, to have been neither public nor private but instead nearly invisible” (p. 85). This is most unfortunate because the restaurant—as “publicly private space”—raises fundamental questions about the terms “public” and “private” so central to current historiography. The restaurant described by Spang confuses the standard picture. It is precisely this confusion, this blurring of lines, that makes this work so intriguing and so innovative. Throwing open the doors of the restaurant, Spang attempts to re-examine “public” and “private” and in doing so provides the starting point for a long-overdue critique of the prevailing Habermasian model.

“Dis-moi ce que tu manges, et je te dirai qui tu es” is the oft-repeated maxim. The food enthusiast and the scholar alike will benefit from sinking their teeth into Spang’s work. Her re-examination of the writings of those philosophers and technicians of the early nineteenth century who developed the “science” of French gastronomy will be especially useful. Spang locates the origins of discussions of the body, health, and medicine at the heart of gastronomy within the culture of the Enlightenment. This provides a much needed context for understanding the gastro-medical writings of the pioneers of gastronomy, such as Brillat-Savarin and Alexandre Grimod de La Reynière. Here, Spang critically engages these works, taking seriously their scientific pretensions. She equally engages the discourse about the links between food and the fate of the nation, placing them within the context of the medicalization of society and France’s developing culinary identity. The result is an engaging exploration of the restaurant as a site for a post-revolutionary negotiation of “Frenchness.” The rich discussion of the emergence of forms of sociability, rituals, and rhetoric is so tantalizing that the reader,

far from being satiated, will hunger for more.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Aron, *Mangeur du XIXe siècle* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1973), pp. 10-11.

Kolleen M. Guy
University of Texas at San Antonio
KGUY@utsa.edu

Copyright © 2002 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