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Down to the Last Cream Puff

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Au Revoir to All That: The Rise and Fall of French Cuisine by Michael Steinberger
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The winner of a horse race is the fastest animal, but in a dog show the best of breed isn't the fastest, or the biggest, or the hairiest, but the truest to type. The top beagle is reckoned to be the essence of beagleness, and the best dog in show is the animal that is more true to its type than any other is to its. So where – among these and other economies of merit – do we find notions like the best dish, the best chef, the best restaurant, or even the best national cuisine? And what kind of sense does it make to say that one national cuisine has lost the race for excellence to another?

Different people have their own opinions about good stuff to eat and our official Masters of Taste don't speak for all of us. The search for robust standards in these sorts of thing is itself an acquired taste, and not everyone sees much point in it. There is a natural disposition for people to find their own national dishes the tastiest and to prefer the way mother used to cook. The perfect miso ramen doesn't move Germans the way it does Japanese, and in Juzo Itami's film *Tampopo* the search for noodle soup perfection isn't about innovation but integrity, getting at the essence of stock, noodles, pork, seaweed and spring onions, and achieving the perfect balance between them. If you've got an appetite, and enormous chunks of red meat are what you like, then search out a Brazilian churrascaria. If searing heat and a lesson in umami is your cup of tea, then you'll probably go for Korean food. If you want a restaurant to amaze you and expand your sense of the culinary possible, go to Moto in Chicago or, if it ever opens again, elBulli in Catalonia. And if you want a terrific plate of Umbrian *salumi*, try Ristorante Granaro del Monte in Norcia.

But this sort of culinary relativism isn't what foodies and food critics have in mind when they award stars and points to restaurants or when they say that the cuisine of one country is better than another's. Relativism about Truth gets some academics worked up, but the emotions of epistemology really don't amount to much compared to the passions of gastronomy. A lot of us care a lot more, and spend more time caring, about the goodness of

food than the soundness of Truth theories. We also spend a lot more on food. Food judgments are bigger business: we put our money where our mouths are. At one time, a lot of us – fewer now – put our money on French haute cuisine.

France taught Americans how to eat. The lessons were about more than just eating well; they were about living well. It was never merely about the food, and the idea that there was nothing *mere* about food, that food was never merely fuel, was lesson number one. For Julia Child, the epiphany was a simple sole meunière in postwar Rouen: ‘I closed my eyes and inhaled the rising perfume ... I chewed slowly and swallowed. It was a morsel of perfection.’ Julia wasn’t the first American to swallow France whole. The mysteries of haute cuisine had been revealed to visiting and expatriate Americans from the Gilded Age to the Jazz Age, and after World War Two they returned to see if it was still as it had been. In 1929, the young M.F.K. Fisher had her initiation chez Aux Trois Faisans in Dijon – ‘safe in a charmed gastronomical circle’, having ‘seen the far shores of another world’. In the 1950s, the journalist Waverly Root lectured meatloaf-era Americans on the glories of a correct bouillabaisse. A.J. Liebling told *New Yorker* readers about the necessary conditions for being what he called a serious ‘feeder’ – ‘It goes without saying that it is essential to be in France’ – and Joseph Wechsberg did major damage to the magazine’s expenses budget by explaining what Michelin stars meant and then filing reports from every one of France’s three-star establishments.

Alice B. Toklas wrote her *Cookbook*, she said, ‘for America’, partly to explain the ‘delicacy and poignancy’, the perfect balance, of French cooking. (Alice’s recipe for boeuf bourguignon doesn’t have Julia’s rigour, but then Julia doesn’t have Alice’s recipe for hash brownies.) For another American Alice, a year in France in the 1960s was transformative. A single dinner in a Brittany restaurant changed everything for her, and, through her, for much of America: ‘I’ve remembered this dinner a thousand times ... I learned everything in France.’ When she got back to Berkeley, Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse as a homage to French cuisine and last year France returned the favour when she joined Julia Child in the Légion d’honneur.

And so France has a unique power to let Americans down. One of the first and most influential of the disappointed was Adam Gopnik. Writing in the *New Yorker* in 1997, Gopnik asked whether there was ‘a crisis in French cooking’. The question was rhetorical. ‘The muse of cooking’ had abandoned France and, shockingly, ‘migrated across the ocean to a spot in Berkeley, with occasional trips to New York and, of all places, Great Britain’. What good was a mother who had to take cooking lessons from her own daughters? In 2003, coinciding with American outrage over France not joining the Iraq invasion (remember the wonderfully rechristened ‘Freedom fries’?), the *New York Times Magazine* announced the stunning news that ‘Barcelona, not Paris, is now the vanguard capital of Europe, not least because of its wildly experimental cooking ... Something happened in France – they ran out of gas.’ The excellent American food and wine writer Michael Steinberger now follows Gopnik and the *New York Times*, concerned that haute cuisine has gone to pot. The disappointment is clear;

its cause is not so clear. Is the problem that French cooking is not what it was, or that it is? In *Casablanca*, Bogie reminded Ingrid Bergman that 'We'll always have Paris.' Now, it's not so certain we will.

The basic cause of France's falling behind is a failure to innovate. For Gopnik, 'one of the principles of high French cooking' is a commitment not just to intensity but to innovation, making things 'far more original than anyone can imagine'. Combinations, preparations, tastes which are not just very good but very new – things to eat that expand your vocabulary of tastes. That's why high cooking is supposed to be an art, like a painting that shows you a horse in a way you've never thought to look at a horse before and changes your subsequent perceptions of horses. And French haute cuisine was long supposed to be like the winner of a horse race, not to be the fastest, but to be the most innovative.

That's pretty much Steinberger's position too. Haute cuisine once sat at the global top table and now it's been pushed aside by other nations. The new tastes, new combinations and new presentations come from Spain, Japan, the United States and the changed beyond recognition restaurant scene in Britain. *Au Revoir to All That* argues that French cuisine got complacent, smug in its historical supremacy; its chefs paid little attention to what was happening in what had been the culinary provinces. As one French chef acknowledged: 'People didn't really cook; they just practised a cuisine,' and French cuisine, Steinberger says, got stuck 'in a sort of time warp'.

The charges come in several courses. First, the nouvelle cuisine revolution of the late 1960s and mid-1970s was either allowed to fail or (Steinberger's favoured line) was betrayed from within. Much ridiculed (tiny slices of kiwi fruit garnish, big white plates, enormous bills), nouvelle cuisine was christened and publicised by the journalists Henri Gault and Christian Millau, and was, in Steinberger's opinion, a genuine attempt to overthrow Escoffier's 'cuisine classique'. While Escoffier had once said 'faites simple,' classic French haute cuisine had evolved into a practice bound by rigid rules, based on heavy sauces, oceans of cream and butter, and all-day reductions. The chefs of nouvelle cuisine wanted to make it simpler, lighter, fresher, prettier, healthier, at once more artistic and more 'natural', more open to foreign inspirations, especially from Japan. (It was the local and seasonal sensibilities of nouvelle cuisine that Alice Waters carried back to the eastern edge of the Pacific Rim.)

The cooking revolution in France was fuelled by the évènements of May 1968 and it shared the anti-authoritarianism of student radicalism, rebelling against the idea of doing things 'by the book'. Yet, as Steinberger notes, while the student radicals were trying to bring about revolution from the outside, nouvelle cuisine was cooked up from within, by some of the best-bred and most influential practitioners of classic French cuisine – such chefs as Michel Guérard, Alain Chapel, Jean Delaveyne, Jean and Pierre Troisgros. And it was betrayed, Steinberger says, by the media-savvy chef Paul Bocuse, wrongly identified as a leader of

nouvelle cuisine. The new cuisine revolution needed its Trotsky, but what it got in Bocuse was its Stalin. What Bocuse did was to erode culinary creativity by taking its human source away from the stove. He established a new conception of what it was to be a successful 'executive' chef: abandoning the kitchen, launching frozen food lines in France and Japan, and turning himself into a global brand. The model was followed by a younger generation of star chefs, such as Alain Ducasse. Researching his book, Steinberger went to Bocuse's still three-star-rated restaurant near Lyon: 'The food was awful ... Every dish was overwrought and plodding,' especially the centrepiece filets de sole: 'a piece of tasteless fish submerged in a cream sauce thicker than plaster of Paris and flanked by a small pile of gummy noodles'. Nouvelle cuisine was the light that failed, or that was prematurely extinguished, and, while there are notable exceptions, from the 1980s French cuisine settled back into its tired traditions. A failure of nerve and imagination sapped its interest in innovation; its capacity to absorb influences from East and South Asia was more limited than that of other national cuisines; and changes in the bourgeois and agrarian cultures that once sustained haute cuisine undermined its historic sources of quality.

Steinberger is most worked up about what's been happening with fine dining, but he recognises that haute cuisine has been nurtured by rich traditions of domestic cooking, by the quality and regional diversity of French produce (wines, cheeses, fruits, vegetables and meats), by the thousands of cafés, bistros, brasseries, boulangeries and charcuteries that uphold ideas of quality – a good baguette, a good coq au vin, raie au beurre noir, or tripes à la mode de Caen, a decent cru Beaujolais, a proper raw-milk Camembert, tête pressée, sandwich jambon-beurre, andouille, céleri rémoulade – and by French consumers who know what is good, who value it and who are willing to spend the time, effort and money to get it. [*] But Steinberger isn't sure that these things have much more of a future in France than fine dining.

The statistics tell much of the story: in 1960, there were 200,000 cafés in France, now there are about 30,000, an average of two closing every day; the French home meal a generation ago took 88 minutes to prepare, now it's 38 minutes; the great majority of French cheeses were unpasteurised in the 1950s, now only 10 per cent are made from raw milk; French family-owned wineries and farms have been going out of business at an alarming rate, and the proportion of the labour force employed in agriculture has dropped from 20 per cent in the 1960s to about 5 per cent today. And you surely have to give attention to some of the good things that have also eroded traditional foodways in France, as they have in many other countries: for example, slightly better pay for restaurant workers and the unshackling of women from the domestic kitchen. In *Distinction* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu addressed the declining 'taste for elaborate casserole dishes (pot-au-feu, blanquette, daube)' in terms of women's changing role in France, and also as an illustration of the concept of 'cultural capital'. Your food is supposed to get lighter as you move up in the world.

The second most profitable national market for McDonald's is now France. The Great Satan of

dietary *mondialisation* is now woven into the fabric of French life and, while Steinberger has no taste for fast-food *malbouffe*, he also has no time for the facile notion that this is a story about Americanisation: 'The quarter-pounded conquest of France was not the result of some fiendish American plot to subvert French food culture. It was an inside job, and not merely in the sense that the French public was lovin' it – the architects of McDonald's strategy in France were French.' The French buy 'Les Big Macs' because they like them. McDonald's French executives have successfully argued that it is a French company, supplying emerging French needs, adjusting its facilities to French habits, and sourcing its beef, bread and condiments from impeccably French sources. One of McDonald's advertising campaigns posed the question 'D'où vient ton McDo?', since the company was happy to supply the answer.

American and British foodies appear at times 'plus royaliste que le roi', reminding French food culture what it owes to the world and, specifically, to those whose lives were turned inside out by a French epiphany. Steinberger visited Philippe Alléosse, owner of perhaps the best cheese shop in Paris. Shopkeeper and foodie shared their alarm over the decline of raw-milk cheeses and the rise of industrial junk, and then Alléosse told Steinberger where he thought the blame lay: 'No French chefs come to visit here. We get foreign chefs, but no French chefs. The French think that good cheese is too expensive. It is the Americans and other foreigners who support quality. I have Americans coming into the store saying: "Philippe, you must continue, you must protect lait cru cheeses, you have the best métier in the world." I never hear that from French people.' Here, as elsewhere, the natural allies of terroir and Slow Food are the technologies of globalisation: the internet and the 747.

If haute cuisine has been eroding at its base, the fine dining business model in France has also been failing, taking down the best as well as the mediocre. Feeding people fine food is a business, and, while creative chefs can sometimes shape diners' tastes, they can never escape market forces. Diners will not buy what they don't want and no restaurant can run indefinitely at a loss, sustained only by creative passion and cheffy integrity. Haute cuisine, in either its classic or new form, isn't cheap and it never can be. In 2003, France was stunned by the suicide of Bernard Loiseau, chef at La Côte d'Or in Saulieu and a star of the nouvelle cuisine movement. Loiseau had devoted his life to winning his third Michelin star, and when he got it, it drove him to the brink of financial ruin and then killed him. To get your third star, you need exceptional culinary skill but also – though the directors of the *Guide Rouge* may deny it – luxury: good linen, crystal, china and cutlery, decent paintings, for country hostelry a well-tended garden, a spa, fitness facilities. Many French chefs apparently believe that Bocuse got his third star for 'prettifying his bathrooms'. All this costs money, and, by the time Loiseau achieved his goal, he owed the banks a fortune. Following the Bocusean model, Loiseau expanded into foreign restaurants and branded food, and became the first French chef to secure a listing on the Paris bourse. He had to do this to pay off the accumulated debts. Then in 2002, rumours began circulating that La Côte d'Or was about to lose its third star. It didn't,

but the almost as influential Gault Millau guide took it down from 19/20 to 17/20, and Loiseau knew he had been put on notice. On 24 February 2003, he did the lunch service at the restaurant, then went home, got his shotgun and blew his brains out. He was 52 years old and at the peak of his career. The press worked up his suicide into a story about the Condition of France. Two books were written in English about Loiseau's obsession and the heroic chef Gusteau in the Pixar movie *Ratatouille* was modelled on him.

Steinberger puts some of the blame for Loiseau's suicide on his search for media celebrity and global glory, but brute facts about the economics of fine dining in France also had their effect. The problems run from the particular to the general. La Côte d'Or is in a small town in Burgundy, on the N6, about 250 kilometres from Paris. The *Guide Michelin* describes a two-star restaurant as 'table excellente, mérite un détour', while a three-star is 'une des meilleures tables, vaut le voyage'. But both laws and attitudes have changed with respect to 'driving under the influence', cheap airfares have attracted well-heeled French people to more distant holiday destinations, and 9/11 and two stock-market crashes since the beginning of the century have affected the numbers of American tourists coming to France. Talk among the Manhattan chattering classes of 'a crisis in French cooking' hasn't helped either – if not a self-fulfilling prophecy, it perhaps accelerates the 'decline' it purports to describe. The kind of food that is indeed 'worth the trip' is caught up in the perception of who's winning and who's losing in the fine dining race. (I can get from Boston to Barcelona for about the same price as flying from Boston to Paris or Lyon, and for \$400 more – or the price of a high-end meal for me and maybe something decent for my wife – I can get to Tokyo, which now has 11 Michelin three-star restaurants, one more than Paris.)

The Michelin system saddles restaurants wanting to get or maintain their third star with a crushing financial commitment. A three-star restaurant in Saint-Etienne went bankrupt in 1996 – the first time that had happened to one of the super-elite – and in the same year Marc Veyrat's top-rated establishment in Haute-Savoie, then \$9 million in debt, had a near-death experience. In 2005, Alain Senderens, of the three-star Paris restaurant Lucas Carton, handed back his Michelin stars, following the example set in London by Nico Ladenis and bad-boy star-chef Marco Pierre White. The burden was too much, and the economics didn't compute. Convinced that Michelin requires a soigné ambience, Senderens had been spending a fortune just on flowers for the dining-room, but, as he said, 'it didn't make the food taste any better.' Haute cuisine might not be quite finished, he went on, but it had entered a 'new age'. Diners didn't want to pay as much for their food; they didn't want restaurants to tell them how to dress; they didn't want to spend quite so long at table; and they wanted very good food on their plates served up with less grandeur, less hauteur and a lot less froideur. Nouvelle cuisine had aimed to lighten up the food, and 'new age' clients wanted to lighten up the dining experience.

All this indicates that if there is 'a crisis in French cuisine', it has to be interpreted as a sign of

some very wide-ranging social, political and cultural changes. In the early 19th century, the great gourmand Brillat-Savarin said that if he knew what you ate, he could tell you who you were, and what applies to an individual also works for a nation. Steinberger doesn't set out to criticise modern French society, but he winds up doing it anyway. (The US edition of *Au Revoir* has a different subtitle, possibly designed to tap into whatever remains of anti-French sentiment whipped up by the Bush administration: it is *Food, Wine and the End of France*.) What's wrong with French haute cuisine is what's wrong with France, and this is where Steinberger's nostalgia for a lost French way of eating begins to look very Anglo-Saxon indeed.

Here the villain of the story is not Bocuse but the dirigiste French state. In Steinberger's story, innovation in haute cuisine, and probably haute cuisine itself – for all the talk of passion, aesthetics and integrity – flourish in a free enterprise system, and so his critique of French cuisine moves smoothly into a celebration of capitalist entrepreneurship and a condemnation of anything that stands in the way of the entrepreneur: restrictive labour laws, crushing VAT burdens, mountains of forms and government inspections. Steinberger's purpose is the preservation of fine food and fine dining, but the rhetoric comes straight out of Thatcherism and Reaganomics: 'France's government seemed determined to take a hammer and sickle to free enterprise, to punish the striver rather than the slacker, and to micromanage the economic life of the nation down to the last cream puff, and the results, if not as catastrophic as what befell the Soviet Union, were pretty dire all the same.' The literature produced in the last decade by the French writers known collectively as *les déclinologues* – bestsellers with titles like *Doomed France*, *Bankrupt France*, *France in Freefall* – was mainly concerned with economic decline and social malaise, but it runs parallel to French (as well as foreign) anxieties about what has been happening to restaurants and the food supply. The right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* ran a soul-searching series on the question 'What Does It Mean to Be French in 2004?' and many of the contributions could have been used in a debate about 'What It Means to Eat in France Today'.

Some of the 'declinists' think that what would set France right is a good dose of Thatcherism and Chicago School economics, and Steinberger considers that this sort of remedy would do much to fix the national cooking crisis. Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, Reagan was elected president in 1980, and Mitterrand's long reign began in 1981: 'Insofar as the restaurant business was concerned, the United States and Britain unquestionably took the better route,' Steinberger says, and this despite the fact that Mitterrand was a very great gourmand while Thatcher was of the 'food is fuel' persuasion and Reagan's favourite foods were macaroni and cheese and liquorice jelly beans.

In standard histories of the rise of the French restaurant, chefs to aristocratic houses, cut loose from their ancien régime patrons by the Revolution, went in successful search of a bourgeois clientele. The business of fine dining was therefore underpinned by an expansion of the public seeking good things to eat. Steinberger, however, seems to think that French social

democracy eroded the economic inequalities on which the haute cuisine business necessarily depends: 'Chefs need prosperous patrons. Notwithstanding their other effects, the Reagan and Thatcher eras made the rich richer and spawned vast new wealth, money that bankrolled gastronomic revolutions in the United States and Britain. The French economy stagnated and French cuisine did likewise.' It's not a pretty picture of the world of fine eating: Masters of the Universe at table, braying hordes of the filthy rich tucking into the Bolly and the beluga-laden blini. Say it isn't so.

In one version, something like this must be true. If the goodness of a thing is believed to follow from its price, there will always be a market for whatever is very expensive. Expensiveness means exclusiveness and exclusiveness has cash value. The luxury industry depends on demand for the expensive as well as the good, and that is why producers of luxuries are so concerned about discounting. If you have a fine restaurant, you risk your reputation for quality not just through failures on the plate but through pricing below the luxury level. And you need the plate visibly to communicate something that explains its price, whether through artful labour or mounds of lobster. So the idea that what counts as very fine dining will always be expensive is true, but it's self-reference that helps to make it so: people just will infer that what is very expensive, very grand and very elaborate is also very good.

That's a bit like the horse-race conception of excellence. But part of what's been happening in the foodie world is a rejection of the exclusive horse-race metric in favour of the dog show: very good stuff which is not necessarily more expensive, more elaborate or more innovative, but which is truer to type. It's not a matter, as Voltaire said, of the best being the enemy of the good; what's at issue are different conceptions of what is good and what is best – whether the beagle that loses a race with a whippet is necessarily an inferior dog. The recently emerging *bistronomie* movement in France attracts talented chefs capable of winning the Michelin race but who have opted out, electing to offer good food at fair prices, with fewer amenities and staff, often in low-rent districts. Manhattan was losing its infatuation with opulent French haute cuisine long before either Steinberger or Gopnik announced that it was in crisis. Fergus Henderson serves good English food (roasted bone marrow, potted beef) at St John beside Smithfield Market and April Bloomfield does well with rollmops and devils on horseback at the Spotted Pig in Greenwich Village. And above all there's the rising global influence of a cuisine scarcely mentioned in Steinberger's book.

When food critics knowingly say that the 'action' has moved from Paris to Barcelona or Bray, they have rightly identified a change in the geography of innovation, but such remarks ignore Italian cooking and characteristically Italian notions of excellence. Lightness and ideas of healthiness may have something to do with the popularity of Italian food (and of Mediterranean eating patterns in general), but what's telling in this context is the relative unimportance of innovation even in fine Italian cooking and the value placed instead on the quality of a small number of ingredients and on trueness to type. The River Café has almost

certainly been one of the most important recent influences on British conceptions of good food, and the 'New American Cuisine' at Chez Panisse now seems at least as marked by Italian sensibilities as by French. Alice Waters's recent menus have included ricotta and cherry tomato bruschette, pizzette with porcini, spaghetti alla Norma, and spinach and borage tortellini.

My wife and I had a short vacation in Umbria a little while ago. The most memorable things we ate were a plate of gnocchi with fresh broad beans, some wild asparagus on scrambled egg, and that plate of *salumi*. Splendid. Best in class.

[*] Steven Shapin wrote about Camembert in the *LRB* of 20 November 2003.

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