Cooking Class

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March 25, 2016

Though food writing has been an elite delicacy for most of history, for a brief moment it became a middle-class staple

FOR much of history, food writing was done by the elite for the elite. This is clear from the beginning: Marcus Gavius Apicius, for example, was a Roman profligate known for the obscene amounts of money he lavished on his stomach. He also happened to have had compiled the first cookbook (or, at least, he and a number of wealthy men bearing the same name did so over several centuries). Like his fellow Romans, he disliked actual kitchen work, saving it for his slaves. But he loved to write about all things culinary.

With Apicius the mold was set. Even our more contemporary food writers were unusually privileged, if not as lavishly so. M.F.K. Fisher's father owned newspapers. Elizabeth David was a debutante whose family had enriched themselves through land speculation and coal mining. Harold McGee studied at Yale with Harold Bloom.

Yet alongside those more privileged sorts were many writers from more unassuming backgrounds. Indeed, after five years of writing *The Austerity Kitchen*, my blog about alimentary culture and history, it's hard to escape the conclusion that some of the best food writing (in the United States, at least) appeared right after the second World War, when a robust economy coupled with increased social mobility enabled more people to contribute to the genre.

A look at the biographies of the genre's more esteemed contributors reveals as much. Take Clementine Paddleford, for example. The daughter of a Kansas farmer, Paddleford graduated in 1921 with a degree in industrial journalism. She went on to edit a women's farm journal before moving to New York. There she would flourish, becoming the food editor of the *New York Herald*, the newspaper that writer Mark Singer called "the best written and best edited and, except on lousy days, the most fun." Paddleford wrote for other publications too, and to gather material for her work she flew a Piper Cub around the country to report on America's regional cuisines. Along the way she transformed writing about food into legitimate journalism.

Many of Paddleford's food-writing contemporaries were just as varied. Though Calvin Trillin was a Yale grad, he was also a product of Kansas City public schools. Craig Claiborne used his G.I. Bill benefits to attend the École hôtelière de Lausanne in Switzerland. Waverley Root, newspaper man from Providence, Rhode Island, leveraged his position as a foreign correspondent to report on Europe's finest cuisines.

But the robust and vibrant food writing culture of the last seventy years or so has, at least so far, been the exception. A look at the state of food writing in the centuries that preceded it betrays as much. The figure of Apicius dominated for quite a long time. After the long dark age that followed the sacking of all those well-stocked Roman larders, food writing, like almost all literature, remained a genre of the privileged. Indeed, it appeared largely in the form of royal cookbooks that documented the pleasures of the rich.

The authors of these cookbooks were, unsurprisingly, rich, too. In fourteenth century France, we see the flamboyant and wealthy Guillaume Tirel, otherwise known as Taillevent, compile *The Vietnalier* (*Le viandier*) to showcase the gustatory prowess of the first Valois kings at a time when their royal prerogative was crumbling. For his lavish descriptions of sauced lampreys and hare ragouts he was generously rewarded. While the shopkeepers of Paris groaned under onerous taxes, Taillevent accumulated ever more wealth and property. Eventually he rose to the rank of squire, his coat of arms featuring three cooking pots.

Boasting about meals seemed the perfect way of displaying power. More cookbooks appeared, all celebrating the meals of the wealthy and powerful. In 1390 the unnamed master cooks of England's King Richard III published *The Forme of Cury*. Like its model, *The Victualier*, it features detailed descriptions of lavish dishes—almond-and-saffron mush, creamed meat and fish—as well as dishes in the shape of castles and other fanciful designs. The range of ingredients alone is impressive. Many recipes assume the reader's pantry is well-stocked with numerous herbs and vegetables, as well as pigeons, cranes, peacocks, cygnets, rails, snipes, gulls, teals, oxen, mutton, beef, kid, deer, pork, porpoise, haddock, rays, loach, gurnards, gudgeons, crabs, carp, and whelks. Of course, only a king and his wealthy liege could afford such ingredients.

Slowly but surely, things began to change. In the burgeoning cities of Europe, a growing middle class fell captive to the allure of food writing, and we begin to see writers of a less aristocratic heritage contribute to the genre. Sometime between June 1392 and September 1394 an elderly and wealthy townsman wrote *Le Ménagier de Paris*, a compendium of recipes, essays on food, and writings on other domestic matters which he intended for his fifteen-year-old bride. Between its covers is found advice on how to run a household, keep a garden, cook tasty dishes, and sexually satisfy a husband—all the worldly concerns of an emergent middle class.

Bartolomeo Platina's *On Honorable Pleasure and Health* (*De honesta voluptate et valetudine*) appeared in print about the same time as the *Ménagier*, and it also addresses a relatively wealthy, yet not necessarily aristocratic, audience of citizens interested in "good health and a clean life rather than debauchery." *On Honorable Pleasure and Health* bears the distinction of being the first cookbook to elaborate principles of a recognizably modern gastronomy, emphasizing everything from the importance of clean tableware and spotless linen to installing attractive seasonal decorations. Yet as innovative as these contributions were, the book was nonetheless beholden to showcasing certain markers of privilege. One particular recipe, "Peacock Cooked So It Seems to Be Alive," recalls the spectacular feasts of medieval monarchs. Slaughtered by "dashing its feathers into its brain from above," the fowl is filled with spices, roasted, and covered "with its own skin, so that it seems to stand on its feet." It is then gilded "with gold lead, for pleasure and magnificence."

The mention of such elaborate dishes reminds us just how privileged these writers were compared to the rest of society, who, as historian H.S. Bennett has noted, lived on bread, ale or cider, and pottage (a type of porridge usually consisting of peas, beans, or whatever was on hand). The dishes described in cookbooks of the time were truly fantastic, surreal events, as possible to realize for most people as the feasts of the mythical land of Cockaigne.

Our first truly modern food writer came of age when the people, having grown tired of the malnutrition that comes with having to subsist on pottage, were told to eat cake. To Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin we owe credit for the birth of the gastronomic essay. Like his forebears in the genre, Brillat-Savarin enjoyed a cozy existence. Born in the town of Belley to a family of lawyers, he went on to study law, chemistry, and medicine in Dijon. After a stint practicing law in his hometown he was sent in 1789 as a deputy to the Estates-General that soon became the National Constituent Assembly. There he became somewhat famous for a public speech he gave in defense of capital punishment. He inherited a vast fortune, assumed the mayoralty of Belley, and then fled France and its revolutionaries for the United States. He returned to France in 1797. Two months before his death in 1825, he published *The Physiology of Taste*.

After Brillat-Savarin food writing continued to mature and grow more complex. Yet for all that it remained the domain of the comfortably circumstanced, who had since grown in number. It became especially useful to the nineteenth-century American middle class. The work of food writers, many of them now forgotten, appeared in women's magazines, offering American housewives advice on how best to serve a roast or bake a loaf of bread. Behind the cheerful, bantering prose remained a zeal for shoring up economic privilege. Women were told how to live up to a middle-class, republican ideal through preparing tasty, economical food for husbands and children. They were also told how to become better consumers of the many new appliances that had come to attend cooking. As more and more women began buying processed food, they looked to food journalism for this kind of advice. Indeed, as Elizabeth Fakazis writes, "the often symbiotic relationship between food writing, advertising, and the various food industries that continues to influence food journalism in the twenty-first century was established early on."

As the 19th century turned to the 20th, food writing was able to disentangle itself from advertising long enough to establish itself as an important genre in its own right. The postwar economic boom allowed writers to build lucrative careers from researching and recording exciting culinary experiences. It was during this time of more broadly shared prosperity that those food writers of more humble backgrounds began to appear on the scene. But as the economic boom recedes further into memory, what do the next 30 or 40 years hold?

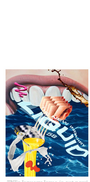
In food writing is reflected the sweep of Western history. From royal cookbooks to the wildly popular mass-produced series of the postwar period (think Time/*Life's Foods of the World*) food writing has more or less been dependent on publishers whose brand identity and editorial style required for their maintenance that food writers adopt a conservative tone. With the ascent of digital media countless individuals began to contribute to a genre once dominated by a lucky few, introducing a wide variety of tones, voices, and sensibilities. There are now apparently more than 227 million food blogs worldwide, and many boast audiences larger than those of established print publications.

This new food writing is inherently destabilizing; it deterritorializes in a classically deleuzoguattarian sense, transcending ideas of nationality and culture. In a food blog—or any blog, for that matter—the global nature of the Internet pervades and informs the local art of writing. This engenders new territories of knowledge. The fluid nature of the medium invites collaboration via links to other blogs, and other sorts of spontaneous, lateral connection. The potential audience for every blog post is global a priori. Readers come from every walk of life, and a user's paths to a blog are as unique as the user herself.

The ephemerality of food blogging invites experimentation. A food blog itself can be erased in a moment or simply abandoned, in the latter case becoming what the Japanese call *ishikoro*, a "pebble." Or it can be contributed to for years, accumulating thousands of posts. An absence of constraint marks the platform, which encourages testing of new ideas. I look at my own bookmarks and see blogs on everything from living on wartime rations (the1940seexperiment.com), on offering a historic menu each day (theoldfoodie.com), to showcasing cross-sections of, well, hundreds of candy bars (scandybars.com). "Nothing is beautiful or loving or political," said Deleuze, "aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growth and rhizomes." The rhizomatic nature of food blogging ensures much of it can be beautiful, loving, and political.

I believe all these things to be positive developments, and I don't believe we should seek to turn back the clock by reviving the decorous style of food writing past. My own blog owes crucially to its freedom from the constraints of print culture, to its amenability to inclusion of images and citations from disparate sources. I cannot imagine how it could be translated to print. Yet its dependence on new media comes at a cost. If many of my *Austerity Kitchen* entries tend to focus on the 19th century, it must be because my consciousness to some extent has been shaped by the neoliberal moment, which, for all its future-forward pretense, simply marks a return to 19th century economics. And so without a robust publishing industry (and few would argue that consolidation of publishing houses and death of print publications has been a good thing for writers), how do people who lack inherited wealth or similar financial means find the time and energy to make a meaningful contribution?

We need to find a way to make this new model of writing and publishing financially viable for writers without resurrecting the monolithic, exclusionary nature of old media. If we don't, food writing will once again be brag sheet about gustatory exploits, a genre in which the Apicieuses and King Richards of the world may crow about their lavish feasts. This would be a shame, because the genre holds much promise for experimentation and offers room for new voices. Something new has finally appeared on the menu. Let's do what we can to make sure it becomes a signature dish.



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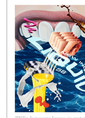

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