

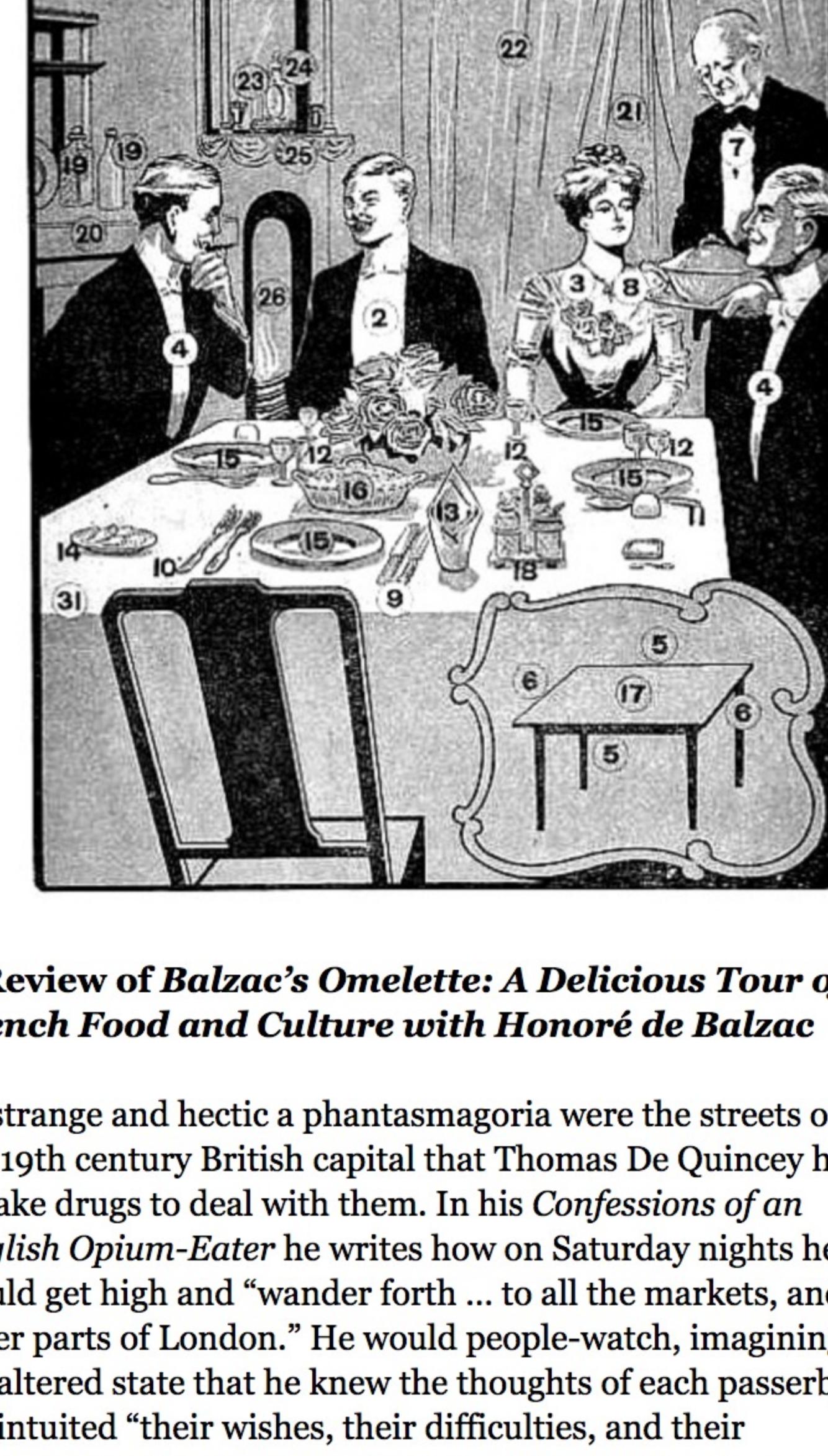


Reader's Digest

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5.—LA SALLE À MANGER.



A Review of *Balzac's Omelette: A Delicious Tour of French Food and Culture with Honoré de Balzac*

So strange and hectic a phantasmagoria were the streets of the 19th century British capital that Thomas De Quincey had to take drugs to deal with them. In his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* he writes how on Saturday nights he would get high and "wander forth ... to all the markets, and other parts of London." He would people-watch, imagining in his altered state that he knew the thoughts of each passerby.

He intuited "their wishes, their difficulties, and their opinions," and fancied that his drug of choice was the "master key" to unlocking the ability to do so. Indeed, without the aid of that substance such particulars would lie imperceptible behind the bustling, overwhelming immensity of the crowd.

Parisian writers were likewise keen on unlocking the secrets of their fellow *citoyens*. For them, however, such knowledge lay not in dope but in diners. As if skeptical of that bit of scriptural wisdom that teaches, "By their fruits shall ye know them," writers in Paris showed greater interest in the dishes into which such fruits were transformed. They believed that, more than just the key to his heart, food was a window on an individual's entire personality.

In *Balzac's Omelette: A Delicious Tour of French Food and Culture with Honoré de Balzac*, author Anka Muhlstein regales readers with anecdotes and excerpts from the great French writer's life that underscore the importance of cuisine in his oeuvre. This influence began early in Balzac's life, during his years at a somber boarding school where "pupils ate little and badly in the refectory," having but "very few fresh vegetables and a couple of ounces of meat or a slender portion of salted fish" to sustain them. A fortunate few received care packages stuffed with "jam, chocolate, or biscuits." Young Honoré, himself not so lucky, could only look on ruefully as he made due with the institutional fare. This bitter experience stuck with him in adulthood. He would later recall how his better-provisioned peers "would smack their lips as they praised their *rillons* [pork bits fried in lard]," pausing only to look askance at his own basket, which contained "Olive cheeses or dried fruit," items that would lead them to exclaim, "Why, you must really be poor!"

These and other such austere lessons (arguably the real content of his education) instilled in Balzac an acute sensitivity to matters gustatorial. He understood that food did more than relieve hunger and impart nutrition; it signaled status in a particularly forceful and specific way. The writer refused to eat simply for eating's sake. He went out of his way to avoid awkward or hurried meals. A portion of "smoked beef tongue and a dozen bread rolls," Muhlstein writes, accompanied the writer on his trips. He would snack on these items en route in order to spare himself the necessity of having to dine in the post house. For Balzac believed that by controlling both the menu items and *mis en scène* of his meals he could control his public image.

This control Balzac exerted was anything but regular. His diet tended to fluctuate. During creative periods—which were often, as he had to write to fend off creditors—he stinted himself for days, subsisting on water and fruit. Muhlstein writes how on certain occasions Balzac breakfasted on "a boiled egg ... or sardines mashed with butter." Come evening, he might nibble "a chicken wing or a slice of roast leg of lamb." To keep the creative juices flowing, he ended his meals with "a cup or two of excellent black coffee without sugar." These productive phases saw Balzac practicing austerities that would befit the strictest cloister, but once he sent the proofs to press he would race to the nearest eatery to down "a hundred oysters" and chase them "with four bottles of white wine." And these delicacies were merely hors d'oeuvres. Subsequent courses consisted of "twelve salt meadow lamb cutlets with no sauce, a duckling with turnips, a brace of roast partridge, a Normandy sole." Dessert followed, as did "a special fruit such as Comice pears, which he ate by the dozen." He usually sent the bills for these orgiastic bouts to his publishers.

If Balzac's publishers picked up the tab it must have been because they recognized that his schizophrenic eating habits reflected his artistic principle, which held that a writer should fast through financially fallow times and feast once prosperity returned. This maxim, as Muhlstein observes, finds expression in Balzac's novels, wherein food is never simply sensual delight but rather a sign system in which certain brute facts of human relations find expression. The Paris of these fictional works is a place where comestibles reveal as much about characters' aspirations and affiliations as any illicit drug does in De Quincey's London.

It is no mere happenstance that food acquired such sociological significance during a historical moment when human aspirations gripped an entire populace. The popularity of restaurants immediately following the French Revolution stands as evidence of food's ability to bestow wealth and status. These businesses flourished during this time of political upheaval not because they allowed the nouveau riche to flaunt their prosperity, but because they allowed them to conceal it. "Setting up and running a household in grand style or laying oneself open to envy or denunciation by giving dazzling dinners would have been dangerous," Muhlstein writes. "It was better to invite and receive guests at a restaurant, where private rooms even offered a degree of discretion."

Of course, once the danger had passed and the post-revolutionary regime, the Directory, was established, the need for such discretion vanished. The newly rich found themselves free to exercise their prerogative—which they invariably did by hosting lavish dinners. "Once they had made a fortune, countless tradesmen wanted to pass themselves off as notable figures," Muhlstein writes. "How well you ate was one way of establishing a rise in status." The example of the tradesman Birotteau, who tries to obscure his low birth and lack of breeding with a dinner "abundant in good humor and merriment," offers some sense of how well parvenus fared in this regard. Though cooked to perfection, the leg of lamb Birotteau serves his guests fails to bridge the gulf. His jokes prove too earthy, his laughter too robust. The tradesman's betters soon slip away, "frightened off by the blazing lights and the exuberant abandon of those dancing." Birotteau thus learns the hard way that "one costly dinner is not enough to erase the social difference between the lesser bourgeoisie and high society or even the world of officialdom."

Servants also tried to erase social differences and likewise used food to do so. Yet since they faced dim prospects for ascension, their means of achieving distinction lay not in hosting dinners, but in stealing them. The phenomenon of the pilfering servant obsessed Balzac. He denounced anyone guilty of this crime as "a domestic robber" and the crime itself as "the worst of financial afflictions." Muhlstein mentions that Balzac thought "theft was so widespread in Paris that it required round-the-clock surveillance." Yet his fear had some legitimacy; servants did help themselves to the household's most desirable foodstuffs, and these they would sell at markets specializing in broken meats and other leftovers. Another trick involved colluding with vendors, who would write receipts for inflated amounts and split with the devious domestic the difference between the stated and the actual charge. So successful was this second subterfuge that it was typically discovered only once the offending servant was spotted sporting finer than that of her employers.

The most skillful hands at stemming this financial "blooletting," Muhlstein notes, were thus "the greatest misers and women who were very careful with their housekeeping."

Balzac's Omelette depicts a city in which people dissemble by aid of expertly baked tarts or exquisitely aged *faisan* and *faisanée* and in so doing make complicated mediations through which their lives could be made intelligible to each other.

"Consumption is not a material practice, nor is it a technical phenomenology of influence," writes the French philosopher and media theorist Jean Baudrillard. It is, rather, "the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready to constitute a totality of coherent discourses and ready to constitute a totality of systematic manipulation of signs." The means of consumption pass excellence of food signs as the means by which individuals enter into to this totality. The accounts of Balzac as a youth reveal exactly how early this particular dimension of human life begins. "Balzac's *omelette* was delicious and how thoroughly it manipulates signs, Balzac was conscious of it. A virtuoso at manipulating signs, Balzac was a poet."

It is this dimension of consumption that Balzac's *Omelette* serves to apprise us of the stakes in the game.



Previously by
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