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Review

Savoir-Faire: A History of Food in France

by Maryann Tebben

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In the summer of 1985, at the ripe age of 15, I arrived in Valenciennes, France where I would be living for a month. Since my formative years, I had loved food and knew that France was supposed to have the best food in the world. Before the trip I had envisioned all sorts of delicious things to eat—exquisite tartlets topped with perfect berries, flaky, buttery croissants, iconic baguettes with pungent cheeses, pots of stews in luscious sauces. My first meal was braised rabbit, couscous, and tart yogurt, served on a cafeteria tray. Almost 30 years later, I still remember this meal in large part for my misplaced disappointment; it was not what I had expected. My feelings were a far cry from Julia Child’s first meal in France, documented in her memoir, *My Life in France*.¹ Leading to the Michelin recommended restaurant, she passes through the Norman countryside and cultivated fields which she describes as “quintessentially French.” Once inside, she notes her waiter’s knowledge of ingredients, and she introduces the idea of *terroir* as she dines on oysters, *sole meunière*, and rye bread with *burre d’Isigny*. She drinks Pouilly-Fume from the Loire Valley (at lunch!) while her husband informs her that in France, good cooking is a “national sport and high art” (165). In her new book, *Savoir-Faire: A History of Food in France*, Maryann Tebben deftly traces the historical development of such experiences: first, not just the dishes, but how we (the French and outsiders; historical and contemporary actors) came to *imagine* “French cuisine” and its perceived excellence through history. She also considers challenges to its understanding vis-à-vis issues of class, immigrants, foodstuffs from French colonies, and modernity.

Much of Tebben’s narrative hinges on the concept of *terroir*. While sometimes translated as “taste of place,” it most deeply means that certain foodstuffs are considered inherently superior due to unique geographical influences—both environmental and cultural. While this can be sensorially experienced, in France it has also become a nationally asserted idea within the *mentalité* of the culture. “French food” also exists as a collective idea, imagined through texts, media, and social practices. Tebben asserts, “*they know how* in food: how to innovate, to refine, to make and enforce the rules, to protect their culinary patrimony, to self-promote. The essence of the French table is excellent food

enjoyed in pleasant company, following the rules that attempt to keep it just as it is” (16). Yet, this does not mean that French food has remained static, nor does it mean that there is a singular French diet now or historically. Through this tension, Tebben’s book shines.

Part of Reaktion Books’ *Food and Nations* series, the first five chapters trace historical moments and their impact on French foodways, some of which occurred long before France existed as a nation. Drawing on the Annales school, which asserts that the environment and social structures most inform history, Tebben begins with the ancient Gauls, who offered the pleasures of the table (unlike the more abstemious Romans). She then turns to the role of Christianity in the medieval period, which instilled the supremacy of wine and bread and served as a tool to separate the Catholic French from the English pagans. The Renaissance saw a further centralization of politics whereby the court utilized haute cuisine to show power and prestige. Simultaneously, geographical differences also offered opportunities for classification (people and foodstuffs). What developed was an emphasis on quality through artisan practices, moral economies, the land, and even the people themselves.

Tebben examines the role of iconic Champagne and cheeses in discussing culinary myths that embed the idea of “quality” to a food. In both cases, technological advances, including canning, meant that local foods were more readily available outside of the region of production (but within the boundaries of France), while conceptually *terroir* became increasingly important in promoting them. Obviously, the French Revolution was a pivotal moment for French cuisine in creating a nation but also shifting attitudes of the political and moral economy of food, especially in the realms of butcher and baking guilds. Ultimately, what resulted was a reorganizing of society based around private and public spheres that included the market and, perhaps most notably, the birth of the restaurant. Restaurants allowed, or perhaps encouraged, individuals to demonstrate their good *taste*—sensorially and aesthetically—a notion that dovetailed with the birth of gastronomy (the pursuit of good food and drink as an art and a science). From here, in the 19th century, French food radiated across Europe and the world. Much of this exposure stemmed from the codification by, and notoriety of, chef Marie-Antoine Carême.

Up to this point, *Savoir-Faire* covers familiar ground to those versed in French food history. Indeed, Tebben acknowledges that she is building on the scholarship of those who have come before her. Yet at the same time, the narrative thread elegantly synthesizes many complexities when trying to define a nation by a set of dishes—country vs. urban, aristocratic vs. middle class, the place of regional dishes—in that ideas and attitudes are really the cultural unifiers.

For me, the next two chapters are the most exciting as Tebben explores how land and bodies represented in literature, film, and geopolitics reify French attitudes about and through food. She reconciles seeming contradictions

within French food. For example, she tackles many expected writers of the 19th and early-20th century but also the experiences of North African immigrants to France as their bodies and dishes reside in France. French food in the post-colonial 20th century, including the transformation of couscous into a regional food of France, illustrates that French food has never been static but continues to morph; it is the idea of a special quality that remains. Tebben's background in French literature clearly shows as she argues that all food references in French literature and film work to fix the "characteristics desired as the reputation of French cuisine: elegance, refinement and preservation of tradition" (226). Equally compelling is chapter seven, which considers the role of overseas French territory in pre- and post-colonialism. It is not simply a list of ingredients, or places where the food is grown, but national boundaries as tied to the land and cultural attitudes that define French food.

The final chapters look at the recent history of French food and national identity with a return to an emphasis on small, regional, and artisan producers, and "concern for the status of French gastronomy as a marketable product and a fixture of French identity," which persists against the realities of fast food and globalized, industrially made foods (281). In the end, Tebben argues that "the multiplicity of French food that reaches from the soil to the clouds of imagination makes it durable. French food benefits from certain unexplainable and irreproducible questions that make it a singular cuisine with a centuries-long story" (295-6).

If I were to criticize the book, some topics are given short shrift. For example, the myth around Dom Perignon (examined in detail by Kolleen Guy) would not be misplaced and the impact of nouvelle cuisine (1960s onward) and the place of fast food in French society are not fully explored. Given the book's breadth of coverage, however, this would be unfair. Furthermore, the high production quality of the book, lavish with full color images and extended primary source excerpts make it an engaging and substantive read. The historical recipes at the end at first seem like an afterthought. But, as I finished reading the book, I found myself reviewing them and imagining which meal I might cook to viscerally transport myself back to France—this time with a fuller understanding of the history and culture behind it.

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NOTES

- 1 Julia Child and Alex Prud'homme, *My Life in France* (Random House, 2007).