The Art of the Table in Eighteenth-Century France

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When Louis XIV died in 1715, doctors noted upon conducting his autopsy that his stomach was three times the size of that of the average adult. Many years earlier in 1665, his valet de chambre, Nicolas de Bonnefons, had written Les délices de la campagne (Pleasures of the country) in which he described a dinner "for reasonable men," consisting of some twenty-odd plates to be served in four courses. Bonnefons noted that, for the presentation, "the middle of the table will be left empty, since the master of the house will have difficulty in reaching it because of his girth."¹ Several pages later, Bonnefons documented some "instructions for feasts"; the eight courses of the feast took more than six pages to describe and included so many plates that the Sun King's eating habits, his sumptuous and excessive repasts, his extravagant and lavish entertainment, became legendary.

The seeds of the culinary revolution, like those of the socio-political one, were planted by Louis le Grand. French cuisine changed very little during the Middle Ages. Even during the Renaissance when a type of more refined cooking was introduced, the French diet remained dominated by certain cereals and legumes for the poor and by spicy, boiled meats for those who could afford them. Vegetables were generally considered indigestible with little to no health benefits attributed to them. During the reign of Louis XIV, all of that changed. The king's preference for certain delicacies, his love for his garden

¹ Nicolas de Bonnefons, Les délices de la campagne, suite du jardinier français, où est enseigné à préparer pour l'usage de la vie tout ce qui croît sur terre et dans les eaux (Paris, 1655), 382. All translations from the French are my own.
and for the fruits and vegetables that it produced, set the stage for the culinary revolution that would bring French cuisine to the pinnacle of the culinary realm internationally.

Like the French Revolution in our history books, the culinary one took time to complete. Both lasted for at least a century before any sort of stability settled in. Reading about the culinary revolution today is reminiscent of reading about the Revolution of 1789 prior to the 1980s. From the histories, the Revolution appeared to have come about as the triumph of bourgeois values and practices over aristocratic excesses and abuses. But just as we have come to consider this interpretation of the fall of the Bastille insufficient and overly simplified, so must we find such an interpretation of the lesser revolution unsatisfactory. So much more was involved, and so much more history must be taken into consideration.

Overeating, after all, was nothing new to the king's court in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Gluttony rather seems to have been a cyclical phenomenon. Even before Charlemagne, the Gaulois ate badly but copiously. What they lacked in variety they compensated for with abundance. Charlemagne introduced a certain order and appreciation into the menu, and he even invited women to sit at his table with his men "on condition that they not bother them with nauseating scents or harmful fragrances."² For all his relative culinary sophistication, however, Charlemagne, the first of France's Seigneurs de la Table, preferred quantity to quality.

French cuisine slept from Charlemagne's death in 843 until the first Valois took the throne in the fourteenth century. Part of the reason for this apparent lack of culinary interest and definite lack of culinary progress was shortage. Toward the end of Charlemagne's life, famine threatened. The emperor was able to fend off the worst by enforcing strict controls such as forbidding the exportation of certain staples and setting maximum prices for comestible commodities. With Charlemagne's death came an end

to food management. The French peasantry suffered greatly and was reduced to mixing dirt into the flour to make bread. Certain leaves and barks similarly entered into the French diet. A people who had primarily eaten meat had difficulty adapting itself to this new regime—so much so that cannibalism was, in certain times and places, preferable to vegetarianism. "There were in France people who regularly ate human flesh, and this during three centuries." References to cannibalism start with the somewhat suspect chronicler Raoul Glaber, who offered detailed descriptions of such occurrences in the eleventh century, and continue to other, more reliable sources that document the great famine of the early fourteenth century. Reliability aside, the information that we have does seem to indicate clearly that abundance, and therefore gluttony, did not characterize the popular Gaulois culture during these centuries.

Overeating, however, did characterize a certain privileged segment of the population. Even when food was relatively scarce—even when it was very scarce—the art of eating remained alive and well in several convents and monasteries. In the twelfth century, Julien de Vézelay described the diet of monks whom he visited: "They drink themselves drunk on the best wines, a source of lust, they gorge themselves on meat when they are neither ill nor anemic, for their pleasure alone they appropriate without any need extra courses." In the fifteenth century, Jean Molinet, who is best remembered for his prose translation of Roman de la Rose (Romance of the Rose), wrote to criticize gluttony:

> By false regard, tongue glad to eat,  
mouth too gluttonous prone to deceit  
As much in talk as well in meat

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Our poor soul, so vile and vulgar,
reason's course doth run asunder.⁵

A critique of gluttony implies that it did, indeed, occur. Michel Rouche has demonstrated that the tradition in convents and monasteries of eating well and copiously is nearly as ancient as the Carolingian dynasty. In the ninth century, Charles the Bald instituted in certain abbeys the *consolationes refectionis* (extra food or drink allowances) to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and other important dates of the royal house and to honor illustrious bishops of the episcopate. Annual feasts, which took place simply because the year had passed, were also put into place at this time and demonstrate the festive nature of these meals. But Rouche's work also demonstrates very well the religious and political function of all this feasting: to legitimize the sovereign and to ensure the succession of the throne.⁶

At the same time as it establishes the cultural, religious, and political significance of monastic feasts, Rouche's work clarifies the specific content and dietary value of the meals. During the ninth century, the number of feasts more than doubled from what monastic rules had prescribed a century earlier. And during these days of feast, those participating in the meal consumed between eight and nine thousand calories. Even on non-feast days, solid rations for the inhabitants of the monasteries increased by 30 percent and liquid rations by 50 percent, once again from those prescribed by monastic rules. There is little wonder that chroniclers should have found fault in such excesses when a large portion of the population was finding it difficult even to survive on a subsistence diet.⁷

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⁵ Ibid., 67–68. "Par faulx regard, langue friande, / Bouche trop gloute et trop truande / Tant en parler comme en viande, / Notre povre âme, vile et orde, / Le cours de raison se desborde."


⁷ Ibid., 1:276.
The Great Famine that beset northern Europe from 1315 until 1322 extended as far south as the Pyrenees, as far west as Ireland, and as far east as Poland. Although it lasted less than a decade, it was one of the most serious catastrophes to affect the European continent, and it lived on in memory for the rest of the century. When it finally subsided, the general French population began to think about improving its menus. But as the culinary somnolence of the Middle Ages ended, a deep divide came to separate the victuals prepared by the cooks of aristocrats from those that made their way onto the popular table. No longer was the distinction merely one of abundance (as it had been during the centuries of scarcity), it was also one of refinement and delicacy, of good taste, and style.8

The revolution of the seventeenth century—the culinary one—did indeed start during the reign of Louis XIV. French cuisine was as young as the child king himself when he ascended the throne in 1643, but it, too, came of age relatively quickly. In 1651, *Le cuisinier français* (The French cook) was published. It was destined for the "table of the Great, and of Individuals" and was the first cookbook to associate French cooking with a passion, a treasure, and a chef-d'oeuvre. It was the first work to describe French cuisine as "delicately readied" and to advocate that plates be garnished with flowers. It was organized by course in order to provide full menus for various seasons or feast days.

Everything about the king's meals was prescribed. The protocol for each meal was strict and taken very seriously. The Sun King employed five hundred people to prepare and serve his meals, which were well rehearsed and lasted approximately forty-five minutes, from 10:00 until 10:45 pm. He was served *au public*, so his antechamber, where he took dinner with his wife, children, and grandchildren, was filled with spectators, all of whom had to bow to the food as it passed by, and none of whom could converse while the king was at table as the monarch did not like to be distracted from his food. The king's plate was made

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of gold, the princes' of silver or vermeil. All the utensils were made of gold and silver as well, but Louis XIV refused to use a fork, preferring rather to wipe his hands on a cloth presented to him after each course.

Naturally, courtiers followed the king's lead, and elaborately excessive feasts were also prepared outside the walls of Versailles as well as in and around the capital. In describing the history of another cultural esthetic, the French garden, Michel Conan writes: "Lesser nobles imitate aristocrats and bourgeois imitate lesser nobles, refinement and good taste diminishing as the models trickle down the social hierarchy." 9 Conan went on to suggest that this phenomenon was in contrast to the overall cultural tide that led the bourgeoisie to challenge aristocratic ideals more and more. Yet considering this assertion in the context of the history of French cuisine potentially challenges its validity. It goes without saying that the aristocrats at Versailles took their cultural and esthetic cues from the king. Lesser aristocrats in the capital followed that lead and were, in turn, copied by still lesser nobles. The bourgeois in Paris who could afford to imitate these latter did so. Certainly, historians have documented the extravagances of Louis XIV and his courtiers well. Varenne's *Le cuisinier français* of 1667 was followed by Massialot's *Le cuisinier royal et bourgeois* (The royal and bourgeois cook) in 1691. So Conan's trickle-down model holds. But there is more to the story than this.

When Louis XV was anointed king of France in 1722, he maintained a public life, but he was not quite as attached to Versailles as his predecessor had been. Instead, he took to participating in all sorts of feasts and festivities outside of the castle, "without mentioning his nocturnal escapades to the public balls. For example, on Sunday, 14 February 1745, the king . . . returned at 6 o'clock in the morning." Or, "it is thus that on 26 February 1745, [the king] having spent the entire night in Paris, 'daylight came only at 5 o'clock [in the afternoon] to the king's

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quarters.” Soon Louis XV began to spend very little time at all in Versailles, though it remained his official residence. In 1750, he slept at the castle only fifty-two nights; in 1751, only sixty-three. When the king did dine at Versailles, he often did so in the company of only a handful of close friends. Fewer servants, round tables, individual glassware, and a more natural approach to cuisine were meant to enhance the intimacy of the meal. The natural approach had, in fact, very little that was natural about it. Recipes grew in complexity and refinement until they became nearly impossible to duplicate. For the first time in the history of French cuisine, the quest for quality outweighed that for abundance.

Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette used the royal dining table to augment the fading luster of the crown. Their society dinners included in the neighborhood of forty people of the highest condition and worth. Aristocrats of the court followed suit, and meals in the higher spheres are reputed to have been of unprecedented luxury and sophistication, requiring an incredible investment of man-hours to produce. Because many bourgeois households were unable to replicate such extravagance in their own homes, they settled for a compromise, simplifying the ingredients and reducing the number of plates. Scholars have suggested that enlightened aristocrats found this bourgeois cuisine meritorious. Some works suggest that provincial aristocrats adopted the principles of bourgeois cooking for reasons of health, having come to understand the physical risks of gluttony sometime during the Scientific Revolution of the previous century. Other works attribute the relative moderation of the provincial aristocratic table to philosophical concerns for equality. Neither of these explanations, however, is


satisfactory, in part because the timing is not quite right to prove either, and, more importantly, because provincial excesses during the preceding period are far from being proven to have been the norm.

The archive of a noble provincial family, the Villevieille, is rich in documents that pertain to over a dozen families closely or distantly related to the Pavée de Villevieille branch, whose castle and its contents survived the Revolution intact. These documents demonstrate that all of the families concerned were drawn toward refinement and luxury, but none toward the excesses characteristic of Versailles, the court, or the capital, at least insofar as dining at their estates was concerned.

The Château de Villevieille is located in Languedoc, France. Its first tower was constructed in the eleventh century. Historically, the Villevieille patriarch maintained close ties to the king and his court, holding the favor and receiving the privileges of consecutive monarchs through the centuries. The first Pavée of known written record paid homage to King Louis VII "the young" in the first half of the twelfth century. François de Pavée, the family's heir at the time it acquired Villevieille, was gentilhomme ordinaire to the Duke of Bretagne, the eldest son of François I. Later, he was King Henri II's maître d'hôtel. In 1622, King Louis XIII was received by Abdias de Pavée and stayed at the chateau de Villevieille while in Languedoc. In the late seventeenth century, Raymond de Pavée "walked in the steps of his ancestors and it can be said that his life was one of continual service." In 1667, he was appointed as the king's lieutenant in the government of Sommières, a castle and city just a mile away from Villevieille. As this appointment was hereditary, the tie between the Château de Villevieille and the king and his court passed to succeeding generations. Early in the eighteenth century, Raimond de Pavée de Villevieille was page

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13 He received the investiture of the seigneur on 2 October 1534.

14 Archives Départementales de la Haute Loire, Le Puy-en-Velay, 99 J 109, E. de Grellet de la Deyte, La généalogie de la maison de Pavée, 1713.
de la grande écurie du roi to Louis XIV. His son entered the service of the comte d'Artois a year before the death of Louis XV. He remained at Versailles when Louis XVI ascended the throne in 1774. As grand écurie to the comte d'Artois, the marquis de Villevieille led the troops of the king's brother, the same troops which would later constitute the foundations for the Princes' Army, which would lead the Counter-Revolution after 1789. In short, the relationship between the Chateau de Versailles and the Chateau de Villevieille was anything but distant. Nor did the culinary revolution that began in Versailles' kitchens go unnoticed by the family. At the castle in Languedoc, much, in fact, was done to participate in the movement that transformed the eating habits of the French.

The castle itself was transformed during the Grand Siècle. A wing was added and a cour d'honneur was created. Careful attention was paid to the addition of a formal dining room, something that was a novelty in the period. The walls of this new room, strangely dedicated to nothing but dining, are covered in seventeenth-century embossed and gilt leather from Flanders. The room contains today, as it did then, remarkable furnishings, among which are two sideboards made by German artisans in Sumène, a marvelous table à gibier and an elegant and immense mirror.

It was the last marquis' grandfather, and then his father, who oversaw the renovation of the castle and the addition to it. François de Pavée de Villevieille, the family's patriarch from 1692 until 1747, kept meticulous records of everything that he undertook, of every expenditure that he made. He was as efficient an accountant as he was a patriarch. Because of this, we know quite a bit about the daily life at the castle during this time. And we know just how much importance was placed on dining; eating well and pleasurably was a priority at Villevieille.

Of the fourteen servants employed to provide for the castle and its inhabitants in the first half of the eighteenth century, seven of them were actively involved in ensuring adequate, varied, and pleasant meals. The first in line under Fosse, the maître du château who oversaw all of the servants as well as all
of the hunting on the estate, was Ville, the cook. Ville's job was, as François de Pavée wrote, to understand meat, vegetables, side dishes, fruits, and spices. He was to take care of the kitchen and of its pans, tools, and equipment. He was responsible for keeping the kitchen well supplied. But waste in the cook's kitchen was not to be tolerated.

Nor was waste to be tolerated from the other servants who were employed at Villevieille. The other domestics directly involved in the castle's food chain were the hunter, Blanc, who furnished the meat to the kitchen; Maurice, who took care of the extensive poultry yard and of the pigeon house; a young boy, identified in François de Pavée's ledgers as "le fils de Terrisson," who was the turkey keeper; François, who was the woodsman; and Peyre the gardener, who was able to graft and transplant.

There were four mills at Villevieille. They provided the castle with wheat and other grains, as well as with paper, soap, and fabric dyes. All four mills were rented out, and the tenants were not required to limit their activities to milling, which was advantageous to all. At the new mill, for example, the renters were also farmers. They were required to supply the marquis with four pairs of chickens each year. The lease of the Vidourle mill came with the privilege to fish the river. The lessee could keep whatever fish he caught with the exception of the carp, all of which he was to deliver to the marquis. A grown carp could quite easily weigh up to thirty pounds.

In order to minimize expenses, nearly everything that was necessary for life at the castle was produced on the estate: fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat. Wheat, garlic, and onions were grown in quantity. Apples, peaches, and figs, along with walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, and chestnuts, were cultivated on the property. Olives were harvested in abundance; mulberries provided both fruit and the ideal leaf on which to raise silk worms. Likewise appearing in the marquis' books are cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry above all: chickens, pigeons, capon, and other fowl. The marquis also had an investment in the salt beds of Aigues Mortes, which allowed him to obtain that expensive and indispensable commodity used not only to season the
kitchen's dishes, but, more importantly, to cure and preserve meats.

The castle's organization and composition reflected the standards of a *maison bien reglée* (well-run house) as described in such detail by Audiger toward the end of the seventeenth century. In his famous book of the same name (1692), Audiger described the ideal provincial castle as requiring a total of sixteen servants, ranging from the highest member, who was charged with running the castle and supervising its personnel, to the lower level servants who were employed to wait on the other domestic staff. Audiger's recommendations differed only slightly from the structure adopted at Villevieille, but the slight difference is an important one: Audiger did not list a cook as an indispensable part of the seigneurial household. Rather, it appears that the task of preparing the meals would have fallen to the housekeeper and her servant. The Chateau de Villevieille was, indeed, on the cutting edge of the culinary revolution. At the same time, however, the excesses that characterized the revolution in royal courts did not characterize the dining habits at the castle.

Life at the Chateau de Villevieille was no doubt luxurious, but it was also restrained and moderate in its luxury. Moderation was explicitly prized at Villevieille, as it was and had been for generations at many other provincial estates. A century and a half earlier, Montaigne had written a whole essay on the topic, "On Moderation," in which he proclaimed, "I love temperate and average natures."

Montaigne called for moderation across the

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15 *La maison réglée et l'art de diriger la maison d'un grand seigneur & autres, tant à la ville qu'à la campagne, & le devoir de tous les officiers, & autres domestiques en général. Avec la véritable méthode de faire toutes sortes d'essences d'eaux & de liqueurs, fortes & rafraîchissantes à la mode d'Italie: ouvrage utile et nécessaire a toutes sortes de personnes de qualité, gentils-hommes de provinces, étrangers, bourgeois, officiers de grandes maisons, limonadiers & autres marchands de liqueurs. Dedié à Monseigneur Phelipeaux (Paris, 1692).

board, making particular mention of the need for it in virtue, religion, love, and marriage. In a manuscript called *Pensées diverses sur l'éducation de la jeunesse en 1715* (Diverse thoughts on the education of youth in 1715), buried deep in the Villevieille archives, the author, like Montaigne, pleaded for moderation in all things. The document was most likely written by Anne de La Fare, the abbess of Bagnols, for the instruction and education of her niece, who would later bring it to the Chateau de Villevieille when she married into the family. Anne de La Fare also specifically mentioned temperateness in virtue, religion, love, and marriage. She added eating and feasting to the list of moderation musts: "Always eat with restraint. Avoid that anyone should incur expense for you; may the simplest of foods appear to be those best adapted to your tastes. May one be persuaded to be able to please you only by good actions and not by parties and feasts." "Fear the meal where there is too much restlessness," she noted. "Receive people in your home with dignity, but without vanity or ostentation."17

Although the microcosm of one castle cannot possibly be taken as representative of the whole of the provincial aristocracy, the Villevieille family circle was not confined to this single, though extensive, country estate as the documents that fill the family's archives attest. Tracing its heritage to the twelfth century and including many illustrious figures, the family, through marriage and birth, established itself across France, in her colonies, and in other European countries. Most relevant here, the Villevieille family write large straddled the court and the countryside. Many members spent their lives beside one king or another. Many others, disgusted by court life, chose to return to their lands, preferring the life of the provincial nobility.18

17 Archives Départementales de Gard, Nîmes, France, 1 E 3141, Anne de La Fare (presumed), *Pensées diverses sur l'éducation de la jeunesse en 1715*.  
18 The marquis Charles-August de La Fare expressed that disgust in prose and poetry. See *Mémoires et réflexions sur les principaux évenemens du regne de Louis XIV, & sur le caractere de ceux qui y ont eu la principale part* (Rotterdam, 1716), 10; *Poésies de Chaulieu et La Fare* (Paris, 1825), 354. Jean Raimond de Pavée made no pretense regarding his preference for Villevieille
The call for a return to traditional values, where talent and esteem replaced luxury and laziness, found its way into the kitchen with the culinary revolution of the eighteenth century. Thus, when France's culinary revolution finally settled into some sort of equilibrium and French cuisine had shed the gross extravagances of Louis XIV's banquets at Versailles, it was not a bourgeois invention that the country adopted. Rather, it was a longstanding aristocratic tradition that had resisted the perversion of courtly influences.