

The Beauty of Food and Its Intriguing Dangerous Splendour

Joe Murray Callaghan (ed.)

DARK SECRET HISTORIES

#5

The Beauty of Food and Its Intriguing Dangerous Splendour

**feat. Brillat-Savarin, François Vatel, Nicolas Fouquet, Prince de Condé, Le Roi
Soleil, Trimalchio, Petronius, Sardanapalus, Lord Byron, Marie
Antoinette, Anthony Bourdain**

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INTEGRAL

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Food Is a Miracle, Food Is an Art... Brillat-Savarin and *Physiologie du Goût*

Food is more than eating for surviving. Sometimes nurturing is replaced by lavish aesthetics and food becomes Art.

The visual presentation of foods is often considered by chefs at many different stages of food preparation, from the manner of tying or sewing meats, to the type of cut used in chopping and slicing meats or vegetables, to the style of mold used in a poured dish. The food itself may be decorated as in elaborately iced cakes, topped with ornamental sometimes sculptural consumables, drizzled with sauces, sprinkled with seeds, powders, or other toppings, or it may be accompanied by edible or inedible garnishes.

Historically, the presentation of food has been used as a show of wealth and power. Such displays often emphasize the complexity of a dish's composition as opposed to its flavors. For instance, ancient sources recall the hosts of Roman banquets adding precious metals and minerals to food in order to enhance its aesthetic appeal. Additionally, Medieval aristocrats hosted feasts involving sculptural dishes and shows of live animals. These banquets existed to show the culture and affluence of its host, and were therefore tied to social class. Contemporary food aesthetics reflect the autonomy of the chef, such as in nouvelle cuisine and Japanese bento boxes. Dishes often involve both simplistic and complex designs. Some schools of thought, like French nouvelle cuisine, emphasize minimalism while others create complicated compositions based on modern aesthetic principles. Overall, the presentation of food reflects societal trends and beliefs.

In Ancient Rome, Banquets were important social events, usually hosted in private residences for friends and clients. The Romans placed great focus on the appearance of their dining room (*triclinium*), decorating it with murals and mosaics, as well as lavish sculptures and furniture. The overall purpose of a private banquet was entertainment, not only through live performances, but also through the presentation of the food itself. The meal consisted of three courses- appetizers, main course, and dessert—brought out in elaborate rituals. For instance, the main course was sometimes served to the tune of trumpets at particularly luxurious events. Foods that were particularly valued were wild game, such as pheasant and boar, certain kinds of fish, and wild berries, mainly because of their exoticism and high price.

Some ancient writers recount Emperor Claudius adding crushed pearls to wine and flecks of gold to peas solely to increase their cost. Others recall live animals being served as shows of entertainment and richness. For instance, at one event mackerels were pickled live in order to showcase their silvery bodies thrashing in vinegar.

Medieval aristocrats also desired to entertain and impress through food. Banquets were usually huge feasts with diverse choices of dishes. Social etiquette dictated that the wealthy and powerful be given beautiful and elaborate dishes while the poor be given simple food, usually scraps. Such banquets not only entertained guests, but also showed the wealth of the host. In particular, the patron sometimes commissioned artists to create complicated sculptures made from food items to awe and inspire. Particular favorites were pies or cakes designed to expel live birds when cut open and multicolored jellies stacked together, dyed with spices and vegetable matter.

Culinary arts, in which *culinary* means “related to cooking”, are the cuisine arts of food preparation, cooking and presentation of food, usually in the form of meals. People working in this field – especially in establishments such as restaurants – are commonly called “chefs”, although, at its most general, the terms “culinary artist” and “culinarian” are also used. Table manners (“the table arts”) are sometimes referred to as a *culinary art*.

A great deal of the study of culinary arts in Europe was organized by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a man famous for his quote “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are”, which has since been mistranslated and oversimplified into “You are what you eat”. Over time, increasingly deeper and more detailed studies into foods and the Culinary Arts has led to a greater wealth of knowledge.

Expert *chefs* are required to have knowledge of food science, nutrition and diet and are responsible for preparing meals that are as pleasing to the eye as they are to the palate. After restaurants, their primary places of work include delicatessens and relatively large institutions such as hotels and other fancy locations.

Gourmet is a cultural ideal associated with the culinary arts of fine food and drink, or haute cuisine, which is characterized by refined, even elaborate preparations and presentations of aesthetically balanced meals of several contrasting, often quite rich courses. Historically the ingredients used in the meal tended to be rare for the region, which could also be impacted by the local state and religious customs. The term and its associated practices are usually used positively to describe people of refined taste and passion. Gourmet food tends to be served in smaller, more expensive, portions. There also tends to be cross-cultural interactions when it comes to *gourmet*, introducing new ingredients, materials and practices.

The word *gourmet* is from the French term for a wine broker or *taste-vin* employed by a wine dealer. *Friand* was formerly the reputable name for a connoisseur of delicious things that were not eaten primarily for nourishment: “A good gourmet”, wrote the conservative eighteenth-century *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, employing this original sense, “must have *le goût friand*”, or a refined palate. The pleasure is also visual: “J'aime un ragoût, et je suis friand”, Giacomo Casanova declared, “mais s'il n'a pas bonne mine, il me semble mauvais”. Contemporary Andre Zimmern also says: “If it looks good, eat it!”.

The derivative *gourmet* has come into use since the publication of the book by Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*. According to Brillat-Savarin, “Gastronomy is the knowledge and understanding of all that relates to man as he eats. Its purpose is to ensure the conservation of men, using the best food possible.”

In the eighteenth century, *gourmet* and *gourmand* carried disreputable connotations of gluttony (one of the original seven sins), which only *gourmand* has retained. *Gourmet* was rendered respectable by Monsieur Grimod de la Reynière, whose *Almanach des Gourmands*, essentially the first restaurant guide, appeared in Paris from 1803 to 1812. Previously, even the liberal Encyclopédie offered a moralising tone in its entry *Gourmandise*, defined as “refined and uncontrolled love of good food”, employing reproving illustrations that contrasted the frugal ancient Spartans and Romans of the Republic with the decadent luxury of Sybaris.

Foodie is often used by the media as a conversational synonym for *gourmet*, although it is a different concept (that of a food *aficionado*). The word *foodie* was coined synchronously by Gael Greene in the magazine *New York* and by Paul Levy and Ann Barr, co-authors of *The Official Foodie Handbook* (1984).

Gastronomy involves discovering, tasting, experiencing, researching, understanding and writing about food preparation and the sensory qualities of human nutrition as a whole. It also studies how nutrition interfaces with the broader culture. The culinary term appears for the first time in a title in a poem by Joseph Berchoux in 1801 entitled “*Gastronomie*”.

Pascal Ory, a French historian, defines gastronomy as the establishment of rules of eating and drinking, an “art of the table” and distinguishes it from good cooking (*bonne cuisine*) or fine cooking (*haute cuisine*). Ory traces the origins of gastronomy back to the French reign of Louis XIV when people took interest in developing rules to discriminate between good and bad style and extended their thinking to define good culinary taste. The lavish and sophisticated cuisine and practices of the French court became the culinary model for the French. Alexandre Grimod de La Reyniere wrote the first gastronomic work *Almanach des gourmands* (1803) elevating the status of food discourse to a disciplined level based on his views of French tradition and morals. Grimod aimed to reestablish order

lost after the revolution and institute gastronomy as a serious subject in France. Grimod expanded gastronomic literature to the three forms of the genre: the guidebook, the gastronomic treatise, and the gourmet periodical. The invention of gastronomic literature coincided with important cultural transformations in France that increased the relevance of the subject. The end of nobility in France changed how people consumed food; fewer wealthy households employed cooks and the new bourgeoisie class wanted to assert their status by consuming elitist food. The emergence of the restaurant satisfied these social needs and provided good food available for popular consumption. The center of culinary excellence in France shifted from Versailles to Paris, a city with a competitive and innovative culinary culture. The culinary commentary of Grimod and other gastronomes influenced the tastes and expectations of consumers in an unprecedented manner as a third party to the consumer-*chef* interaction.

The French origins of gastronomy explain the widespread use of French terminology in gastronomic literature. Gastronomic literature, Pascal Ory criticizes, is conceptually vague relying heavily on anecdotal evidence and using confusing, poorly defined terminology. Despite Ory's criticism, gastronomy has grown from a marginalized subject in France to a serious and popular interest worldwide.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (April 1, 1755, Belley, Ain— February 2, 1826, Paris) was a French lawyer and politician, and gained fame as an epicure and gastronome: "Grimod and Brillat-Savarin. Between them, two writers effectively founded the whole genre of the gastronomic essay".

Brillat-Savarin was born in the town of Belley, Ain, where the Rhône River then separated France from Savoy, to a family of lawyers. He studied law, chemistry and medicine in Dijon in his early years and later practiced law in his hometown. In 1789, at the opening of the French Revolution, he was sent as a deputy to the Estates-General that soon became the National Constituent Assembly, where he acquired some limited fame, particularly for a public speech in defense of capital punishment. His father Marc Anthelme adopted his second surname in 1733 upon the death of an aunt named Savarin who left him her entire fortune on the condition that he adopt her name.

He returned to Belley and was for a year the elected mayor. At a later stage of the Revolution there was a bounty on his head, and he sought shelter in Switzerland at some relatives' place in Moudon and then in the *hôtel du Lion d'Argent* in Lausanne. He later moved to Holland and then to the new-born United States, where he stayed for three years in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Hartford, living on the proceeds of giving French and violin lessons. For a time he was first violin in the Park Theater in New York.

He returned to France under the Directory in 1797 and acquired the magistrate post he would hold for the remainder of his life, as a judge of the Court of Cassation.

He published several works on law and political economy. He remained a bachelor, but not a stranger to love, which he counted the sixth sense: his inscription of the *Physiologie* to his beautiful cousin Juliette Récamier reads "Madam, receive kindly and read indulgently the work of an old man. It is a tribute of a friendship which dates from your childhood, and, perhaps, the homage of a more tender feeling...How can I tell? At my age a man no longer dares interrogate his heart".

His famous work, *Physiologie du goût* ("The Physiology of Taste"), was published in December 1825, two months before his death. The full title is *Physiologie du Goût, ou Méditations de Gastronomie Transcendante; ouvrage théorique, historique et à l'ordre du jour, dédié aux Gastronomes parisiens, par un Professeur, membre de plusieurs sociétés littéraires et savantes*. The book has not been out of print since it first appeared, shortly before Brillat-Savarin's death. Its most notable English translation was done by food writer and critic M. F. K. Fisher, who remarked "I hold myself blessed among translators". Her translation was first published in 1949.

The body of his work, though often wordy or excessively—and sometimes dubiously—aphoristic and axiomatic, has remained extremely important and has repeatedly been re-analyzed

through the years since his death. In a series of meditations that owe something to Montaigne's Essays, and have the discursive rhythm of an age of leisured reading and a confident pursuit of educated pleasures, Brillat-Savarin discourses on the pleasures of the table, which he considers a science. His French models were the stylists of the *Ancien Régime*: Voltaire, Rousseau, Fénelon, Buffon a.s.o.

Aside from Latin, he knew five modern languages well, and when the occasion suited, wasn't shy of parading them: he never hesitated to borrow a word, like the English *sip* when French seemed to him to fail, until he rediscovered the then-obsolete verb *siroter*.

The philosophy of Epicurus lies at the back of every page; the simplest meal satisfied Brillat-Savarin, as long as it was executed with artistry: "Those persons who suffer from indigestion, or who become drunk, are utterly ignorant of the true principles of eating and drinking".

Brillat-Savarin is often considered as the father of low-carbohydrate diet. He considered sugar and white flour to be the cause of obesity and he suggested instead protein-rich ingredients: "Sure enough, carnivorous animals never grow fat (consider wolves, jackals, birds of prey, crows, etc.). Herbivorous animals do not grow fat easily, at least until age has reduced them to a state of inactivity; but they fatten very quickly as soon as they begin to be fed on potatoes, grain, or any kind of flour. The second of the chief causes of obesity is the floury and starchy substances which man makes the prime ingredients of his daily nourishment. As we have said already, all animals that live on farinaceous food grow fat willy-nilly; and man is no exception to the universal law".

He promoted a diet that avoided starch, grains, sugar and flour. He recommended meats, root vegetables, cabbage and fruit.

His reputation was revitalized among modern gastronomes in many parts of the world, by his influence over Chairman Kaga of the TV series "Iron Chef" which introduced to millions to his famous aphorism: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are".

Brillat-Savarin cheese, the Savarin mould, a ring mold with a rounded contour, and *Gâteau Savarin* are named in his honor.

As Brillat-Savarin said, "Cooking is one of the oldest arts and one that has rendered us the most important service in civic life".

***Chef* François Vatel Killed Himself over a Delivery of Fish and Sea Fruits for the Banquet in Honour of Louis XIV**

François Vatel (1631—April 24, 1671) was the majordomo (the highest ranking employee in an aristocrat's household; in French, *maître d'hôtel*) and *master chef* of two great personalities of his time—Nicolas Fouquet and Prince Louis II de Bourbon-Condé.

Vatel served Louis XIV's superintendent Nicolas Fouquet in the inauguration *fête* at the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte that took place on August 17, 1661. Vatel was also responsible for an extravagant banquet for 2,000 people hosted in honour of Louis XIV by the Grand Condé in April 1671 at the Château de Chantilly, where he died. According to a letter by Madame de Sévigné, Vatel was so distraught about the lateness of the seafood delivery and about other mishaps that he committed suicide by running himself through with his sword, and his body was discovered when someone came to tell him of the arrival of the fish.

In popular culture, he is widely but incorrectly credited with creating *crème Chantilly* (Chantilly cream), a sweet, vanilla-flavoured whipped cream, but there is no contemporary documentation for this claim, and whipped, flavored cream was known at least a century earlier. In fact, Vatel reinvented it. Vatel was depicted in the 2000 film *Vatel* by Roland Joffé, with Gérard Depardieu playing the titular role. According to the film, Vatel committed suicide when he realized he was nothing more than property in the eyes of the nobility, his social superiors. In 1981, the hotel management school in Paris was named after François Vatel—"Institut Vatel".

Fussy and histrionic French chefs have long been a comedic trope, but few people have embodied that fussiness and histrionics in real life as much as French chef François Vatel (1631—1671). Born Fritz Karl Watel, later gallicized to François Vatel, he apprenticed as a pastry cook, then went to work for Nicolas Fouquet, who became king Louis XIV's finance minister.

Since ancient times, rich and powerful people organize magnificent banquets to impress their guests and to gain their respect. This proves that food can be used as an effective tool to show the belonging to the dominant social class. François Vatel, cook and master of ceremonies, is particularly interesting from this point of view: he was, in fact, one of the most skilled creators of incredible "cooking spectacles" during the Seventeenth Century. Through his wonders, the elite of that period displayed all its wealth and power.

In Europe, during the Renaissance and the Baroque, banquets reached such a level of magnificence and complexity to look like theatrical representations, in the belief that exquisite delicacies, if served in the right setting, could gain additional flavor and transmit unique sensations. The spectacles accompanying food were so elaborate to require a proper director: the "master of ceremonies" was appointed with the difficult task of choosing the right timing for courses, songs, dances, wines and amazing special effects. Many of the greatest artists and scientists of the time, were hired to create incredible works of art and machinery to be used during these feasts: the goal was to leave guests amazed and delighted. Their clients were the richest and most powerful members of the society, sparing no expense to celebrate themselves. François Vatel was much more than a cook. He was in charge with not only food but all the entertainments that 17th century aristocrats loved: waterworks, fireworks, masques, stage illusions, too.

He spent most of his life at the service of the richest nobles of France. He was a great cook, but quite often this was not enough: his employers were bored and capricious people, always asking for something new and unexpected. Food, although delicious, was just trivial to them: for this reason he