

have discovered tastes of which they had no inkling just a few years ago. Long gone is the unquestioned superiority that allowed a French restaurant guide to judge Japanese cuisine as neither good nor bad but simply “astonishing.” Other cuisines today lay claim to culinary precedence. Even so, and however assertively its ascendancy is contested, French cuisine retains its power as the ideal of culinaryity. Today as in the nineteenth century, though differently, French cuisine supplies a point of reference and a standard. It is that identification of cuisine, country, and excellence that *Accounting for Taste* seeks to understand and, indeed, account for.

## II.

And so one can hope to discover, for each particular case, how cuisine is a language in which a society unconsciously translates its structure, unless, equally unconsciously, it agrees to reveal its contradictions.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'Origine des manières de table* (1968)

The French, as we all “know,” are culinary masters—so much so that to modern ears, *gastronomy* sounds far more like a French enterprise than the original Greek word on which it is based. The etymology of the term—the law (*nomos*) of the stomach (*gastro*)—presumably refers to a biological fact, but the law of the stomach in France legislates much more than what actually enters the digestive tract. It bespeaks the normative nature of French foodways that so strikes foreigners. At some level, everyone acknowledges the rules, regulations, and hierarchies that make eating in France at its best a distinctive experience. However much culinary dissidents may flout these rules, few can afford to ignore the laws of gastronomy. As an emblem of French civilization, cuisine ranks right up there with cathedrals and châteaux, recognized by citizen and visitor alike as somehow intrinsically French. Not without reason did that superlatively French writer, Marcel Proust, identify his great novel with a cathedral on the one hand and a sculptural beef in aspic on the other. Moreover, the recognition obtains whether or not the cathedral is actually visited or the great meal consumed. Each belongs to the national heritage.

But what makes Proust's beef dish French? How did it get to be part of that heritage? How does it differ from the boiled beef that is a staple all over the world? Why does food loom larger in the cultural landscape of the French, if in fact it does? True, French elites have invested heavily in culinary affairs at least since the seventeenth century; to what extent have these official resources moved down the social scale and out to the country as a whole? What

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does French cuisine “do” for France? Why has this tradition not become just another vestige of the Ancien Régime, such as Versailles or the châteaux of the Loire Valley, visited for their distance from life today? Finally, what future does our assertively postmodern era hold in store for distinctive cuisines, French along with many others? How do the cooks and chefs, these artisans of the everyday, cope with contemporary pressures of globalization, internationalization, rationalization, democratization?

These questions led to this book. The ensuing answers have turned up less in the particulars of French culinary history than in an ideal that accounts for the extraordinary vitality of this cultural product and its position in French culture. As anthropologists have long known, foodways set societies apart from one another. The French can invoke a vast number of regional specialties, from Roquefort cheese to foie gras, but they are hardly alone. Americans, too, can turn out a sizable list of culinary products defined by place—from New York bagels to North Carolina barbecue, New England clam chowder to southern fried chicken, scrapple from Philadelphia, and on and on. These foods, anchored in place, lay the foundations of regional cuisines—the culinary practices defined and enriched, and also limited, by local products and producers. A truly national cuisine is something else again. A modern phenomenon, a national cuisine is part and parcel of the nation-state that emerged in the West during the nineteenth century. As a culinary system both different from and greater than the sum of its regional parts, French cuisine materialized across a tumultuous century of political, social, and cultural revolutions. Cuisine supplied one building block—a crucial one—for a national identity in the making, for it encouraged the French to see themselves through this distinctive lens as both different and superior. Moreover, this form of Frenchness compelled all the more because, unlike Bastille Day or “La Marseillaise,” it was not an artifact of official decree. The power of French culinaryity comes from its reach into daily life. Not that regional cuisines disappeared. On the contrary, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw their integration in a French culinary landscape where they became what they still are: vital components in the intellectual and cultural construct of French cuisine, a lively type for the relationship of the regional parts to the national whole.

An illustration from a guidebook of the mid-nineteenth century cleverly captures the status of cuisine as national cultural good. The tour of Parisian dining in Eugène Briffault's jocular *Paris à table* (1846) takes us to a familiar Parisian monument, the Panthéon. Begun as a church in the mid-eighteenth century, this imposing edifice served the French Revolution as a final resting place for its great men, Voltaire and Rousseau most notable among them. *Paris à table* shifted these priorities. In place of the imposing classical dome, a giant oven-chef bestrides the frieze. With a kitchen knife stuck in his apron and two



sauté pans dangling in front, the monumental chef sports two forks as arms, one of which brandishes a giant skimming ladle. A steaming stew pot—face grins under the pot-cover hat, from which stringy vegetable tops stick out like unruly hair. The inscription on the monument conveys the redirected expression of patriotic gratitude: replacing the “Aux Grands Hommes la Patrie reconnaissante” of the original—To Great Men the Grateful Country—this version of the Panthéon proclaims “À la Cuisine la Patrie reconnaissante”—To Cuisine, the Grateful Country.

France had every reason to be grateful. At least from the mid-seventeenth century, French chefs had journeyed to foreign courts as culinary missionaries. In the expanding economy of the nineteenth century, as Briffault and many others incessantly rhapsodized, the production and consumption of food kept the commerce spinning and the culture lively. All of the many regimes that followed the storming of the Bastille—three republics, three monarchies, and two empires from 1789 to 1870—relied on culinary practices to further their own ends. All of them operated from the urban center of Paris and its definition of country. In this domain as in so many others, it was the bourgeoisie that legislated in the name of France, and it legislated from Paris. Hence the culinary pantheon could stand nowhere else. Like any other cuisine with claims to a national audience, French cuisine negotiates the shifting space between the center and its peripheries, between the capital and the provinces, between the ties to geographical place and those, no less real, to an inclusive cultural space. As the culinary pantheon makes abundantly clear, French cuisine conveyed, promoted, and inspired Frenchness—no small contribution in a country where regional divisions ran deep enough to compromise a fledgling national unity more than once over the century.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, neither the revolution of 1789 that overthrew the monarchy nor the new century of Napoleonic conquest and nation building wiped the slate of cultural legacy clean. Indeed, the purposeful melding of antithetical traditions with contemporary concerns constitutes one of the enduring paradoxes of French society. The new century only strengthened the centralizing forces inherited from the Ancien Régime. “Since 1789,” a critic on the Far Right grouched in 1870 as Paris was besieged by the Prussians, “there has always been a king of France, and only one: Paris.”<sup>1</sup> Others greeted this Paris-centric society with joy. It was, after all, the immense concentration of cultural institutions as well as economic assets in this city that led Walter Benjamin to his celebrated characterization of Paris as the Capital of the nineteenth century.

And one great resource of this kingdom, as *Paris à table* impresses upon us again and again, was the range of public dining it offered the wealthy and (relatively) impecunious alike. Although restaurants first appeared in Paris in the late eighteenth century, they did not dominate public space until the nine-

teenth, when they became one of the most visible and distinctive of modern urban institutions. In contrast with the Ancien Régime, which coupled cuisine and class, nineteenth-century France tied cuisine to country. It urbanized and then nationalized the haute cuisine once sustained by the court and the aristocracy. It translated largely class-oriented culinary practices into a national culinary code. The elites that supported the haute cuisine of the new century shifted as well. Most of them were new to their entitlement, which originated more from wealth than from birth. (Until the Second Republic in 1848, postrevolutionary regimes restricted the right to vote to men of a given tax bracket.) Consequently, the ostensibly apolitical nature of French cuisine was a great advantage in promoting national goals over partisan interests. Culinary practices served political objectives all the more effectively in that the fellowship of the table seemingly transcended political divisions to draw groups together.

In connections that are more than incidental, the French language took a similar path from the old regime to the new. The fetishizing of the French language has its parallel in the adoration of French cuisine; both presumed not simply excellence but also superiority and order. The cuisine of France, like its national language, is greater than the sum of its parts. Each illustrates the relationship between language and speech, between grammar and rhetoric, between code and usage, between collectivity and creator. During the Ancien Régime the use of the French language characterized a specific group—the king and court, the administration and elites more generally—and a particular place—Paris. The events that followed upon 1789 turned that language into the language of the Revolution, loosening the connections to place by extending the collective identification beyond elites and beyond Paris. Of course, the “frenchification” of France required a century. It began with the dismissal of the many other languages spoken in French territory as dialect or patois, neither of which had any place in the new and, it was hoped, unified country. How to decide? In the oft-cited definition of the great twentieth-century linguist Ferdinand Brunot, a language has an army and a navy. So it was with French cuisine. It could call upon an external, incontrovertible authority. As the great chef Auguste Escoffier would observe with pride, it could call on a cadre of missionaries to spread the culinary good news. French cuisine was, he boasted, one of the most effective forms of diplomacy.

These examples raise central concerns of cultural construction and survival. How do cultures work to reconcile past and present? How do they resolve the constraints of tradition with the imperatives of innovation? Studying any culture in isolation skews perspective and compromises every conclusion. *Accounting for Taste* therefore invokes multiple frameworks of comparison. Although my focus is squarely on cuisine in France during the formative years of the nineteenth century, I set culinary culture against other