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## ***Gastronomy, Cuisine, and Political Symbolism in France***

*"Comment voulez-vous gouverner un pays qui a deux cent quarante-six variétés de fromages?"*

French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced at the 2008 Annual Paris Agricultural Trade Show that since France has the best gastronomy in the world, he was asking UNESCO to list French cuisine as part of the world's intangible heritage. Two years earlier, then President Jacques Chirac opened the show by eating chicken from the Bresse region, where a case of bird flu on a European farm had been confirmed. There was no reason to panic he assured his countrymen and it was safe to eat poultry and eggs. In the fall 2008 semester, the University of Indiana initiated the world's first Ph.D program in the anthropology of food.

Many years earlier, Charles de Gaulle asked the people of France's ninety-five departments and some 30,000 communes "how do you govern a country with 246 varieties of cheese?"<sup>[1](#)</sup> Because he used cheese to identify France's fragmentation, his question prompted my speculating about the relationship between food and politics.<sup>[2](#)</sup> Are food and food ways features of French political culture, manifesting themselves in the nation's political life and history? Do they become symbolic mediums of political communication in a nation that exalts its cuisine as a national treasure and component of its civilization?

Answering De Gaulle's inquiry summons us to connect Sarkozy's UNESCO effort, Chirac's Bresse chicken, and Indiana's Ph.D, guided by the framework of the field of Gastronomy. The originator of gastronomic studies is the writer of "tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are," Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. In his 1825 *La physiologie du goût (The Physiology of Taste)* Brillat-Savarin, appropriately born in Belley, France, championed gastronomy, "the reasoned comprehension of the nourishment of men," taking its place as an academic pursuit, predicting it would soon have its own "academicians, its professors, its yearly courses, and its contests for scholarships."<sup>3</sup> He defined gastronomy as the study of whatever may be eaten: its enjoyment, its production, preparation, consumption, and pervasive role in our lives.

Therefore, gastronomy by its nature is interdisciplinary, a central feature of its methodology,<sup>4</sup> abjuring traditional disciplinary boundaries and embracing scholars of the social sciences, natural sciences, the fine arts, and the humanities. However, Brillat-Savarin's vision of gastronomy as an academic endeavor for many years failed to materialize. Not until late in the twentieth century did it begin to be acceptable among scholars. Departments defending their boundaries were suspect of interdisciplinary studies. Other than as a biological necessity, food was allocated little space in the academic division of labor, and not readily accepted as an area for serious scholarship. That changed in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, and gastronomy has emerged as worthy of attention, measured by the rapid increase in gastronomic literature, institutes, conferences, and the acceptance of interdisciplinary studies.<sup>5</sup>

The coming of age of gastronomy studies in the United States is signaled by the Ph.D anthropology of food program started in the fall of 2008 at the University of Indiana. Its

core faculty of eighteen professors and their students will study and do research in an interdisciplinary, holistic framework, examining the relationship between cuisines and cultures.<sup>6</sup>

The French Chief of State's proposal to UNESCO to list French cuisine as a world national treasure exemplifies food's symbolic role and embodies its pervasive connection to politics. The Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted in 2003, to include, for example, oral traditions, performance art, traditional crafts, and social practices. In September 2009, the first inscriptions will announce whether French cuisine will be recognized and confirmed as a world heritage. Paul Bocuse, Alain Ducasse, Michel Guérard, and Guy Savoy, renowned French chefs, back the proposal, befitting their culinary prominence, but also motivated by economic considerations as they seek protection against global competition.<sup>7</sup>

France's legislative branch enters the picture with the Senate's July 2008, Special Session to hear the lengthy report of its Committee on Cultural Affairs. Recognizing "the culinary arts as an essential element of our culture and heritage," the Report covers French culinary history, its economic and tourist importance, and international renown. Contributors to the hearings included a "who's who" of French gastronomy, "a French passion." To secure approval of Sarkozy's initiative, the Senate advocates a diplomatic approach led by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and France's Ambassador to UNESCO.<sup>8</sup>

Three months later the president of the National Assembly, Bernard Accoyer, hosted a dinner for 130 guests to honor the French application to UNESCO for the World Heritage

designation. Great chefs of the hexagon, Christian Millau, Guy Savoy, Joël Robuchon, and Michel Guérard, under the president's patronage, prepared the oysters, *foie gras*, lobster, and truffle stuffed pigeons served.<sup>9</sup>

Sarkozy's request sends a message of his nation's superiority, using its culinary eminence as a medium of political communication. Summoned to convey partisanship and comment on governing, food images convey ideas through eyes, ears, and taste. Political speeches, lyrics, and radio pierce the ears; television, posters and leaflets bombard the eyes; French writer Marcel Rouff captures the spirit of taste when he states that cookery is to taste as painting is the art of sight, and music to that of hearing, adding that gastronomic art is an integral part of universal thought. Concerned with safeguarding French taste, the government in 1990 created the National Council of Culinary Arts. The NCCA established a program to educate thousands of schoolchildren in taste to protect and promote traditional French food.

Taste in preferred dishes and beverages may reflect political orientations (as well as reflect social and economic factors). Two public opinion surveys, one taken by SOFRES in 1984, the other by the Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP) in 1987, specifically focused on food and political preferences. According to an analysis of the latter:<sup>10</sup>

"It is a fact that the French eat very politically." Right, Left, or Center (even the extremes) the habitual cleavages of electoral combat, Right, Left, Center, appear "across the domain of our daily life: our tastes, our preferences, favorite flavors, prepared foods, beverages."

However, the same article's title is "*La France mange au centre*" and comments that electoral France regroups toward the Center. Both polls asked party partisans for their first and second food and drink preferences. Results demonstrate consensus on the main course--*gigot* (leg of lamb), Bordeaux wine, and *charlottes* for dessert (sweet filling within a biscuit framework). Fragmentation appears with cheese, beverages, white wine, appetizers, and deluxe dinners. The Left favors Roquefort, competing with the Camembert fans of the Right. For beverages the Communists (PC) and Socialists (PS) prefer Pastis to the Champagne drinkers of the Center Union for Democracy (UDF) and the Rightist Rally for the Republic (RPR). White wine reveals three groups: the PC and RPR for Riesling, the PS desiring Muscadet, and Le Pen's National Front (FN) ordering Rosé. Appetizers unite the PC and RPR around *coquilles St. Jacques* (scallops), but the PS and UDR savor *huîtres* (oysters). For a deluxe dinner the Right prefers *saumon fumé* (smoked salmon) while the Left orders *langouste* (Lobster).

A Frenchman telling us what he eats is not a gastronomic key to discerning partisanship. Not only is what is eaten symbolic, but also where it is eaten serves as a political communication. *La Gauloise* was identified as the preferred restaurant of the Left, while the moderate Right favored *Faugeron*. Politicians of all persuasions dine at *Chez Edgard*, known as the most cohabitationist restaurant in Paris. As late as 1994, National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen was *persona non grata* at the otherwise politically tolerant *La Gauloise* or *Chez Edgard*.<sup>11</sup>

For generations the *Brasserie Lipp* has reigned as the pre-eminent political restaurant in Paris. Here powerful politicians during the Third and Fourth Republic dined and, it was said, created the governments that later would be undone by the Chamber of Deputies. President De Gaulle in September 1965 directed his two quarreling ministers, George Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (future presidents) to reconcile their differences in the limelight of dining at the *Lipp*. Political differences do not prevent a "Who's Who" of French politicians from the Right to the Left from frequenting the *Brasserie*. When Mitterand was elected President in 1981, that evening when well-known politicians entered, one half of the patrons clapped and the other half booed. A patron at *La Mère Agitée*, a back street Paris Bistro, noted that many regulars were ultra-Catholics, on Wednesday night singing right-wing marching songs. A few years later in 2004 the bistro seemed less into ultra right-wing politics.<sup>12</sup>

"Meals have become a means of governing," wrote Brillat-Savarin, "and the fate of whole peoples is decided at a banquet."<sup>13</sup> Historically his observation applies to the ruling classes placing their power on display at opulent banquets, seating, dishes, and guest lists indicators of stratification and influence. Revolutionary and Restoration eras diplomat Charles Maurice de Talleyrand observed that: "Political issues are decided at table." "It is mainly through the table that one governs," agreed Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérès<sup>14</sup>

During the nineteenth century new political and economic classes developed business and political gastronomy as banquets became occasions for political and ceremonial gatherings. In 1900 the president of France hosted a massive banquet, inviting some 20,000 (figures vary) French mayors, less to dine than to demonstrate and support the

unity of the Third Republic. Seven kilometers of tables under tents in the Tuileries Gardens were necessary to seat France's locally elected representatives.<sup>15</sup>

Chirac fostered international disunity with remarks overheard by a reporter in May 2005. In a cafe meeting with Russia's Vladimir Putin and Germany's Gerhard Schroder in preparation for a G8 Summit, the French President said, "The only thing the British have given European farming is mad cow disease." He followed that with an insult to another country: "You cannot trust people whose cuisine is so bad. . . . After Finland, it is the country with the worst food." He attributed problems with NATO to an unappetizing Scottish dish, haggis. British newspapers countered that Chirac was a nasty, petty, racist creep for his remarks about their food. François Mitterrand made his statement about American cuisine during a 1980s visit to San Francisco. He brought 3-star chef Alain Chapel with him so the visiting French President could have a proper meal.

To reach an audience larger than banquet guests, food is frequently used as a metaphor to make a point with a familiar image instead of a speech to listen to or a written declaration to be read. Americans in 1928 could quickly grasp the Republican empathetic message of "A chicken in every pot." Herbert Hoover did not say it, the Republican National Committee did, its words close to those spoken by King (1589-1610) Henry IV of France: "*Je veux que chaque laboureur de mon royaume puisse mettre la poule au pot le dimanche.*" ("I want every peasant in my realm to be able to put a chicken in the pot on Sundays." A culinary image was adopted in 1995 by the leader of France's extreme Right-Wing National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, to label "*la gauche caviar et la droite foie gras.*"

That same year food as protest was engaged by French farmers who set up a market under the Eiffel Tower in Paris to draw attention to falling prices and unfair Italian and Spanish competition. Tourists watched as Parisians purchased twenty-five tons of melons, peaches, apples, and tomatoes from farmers of the provinces. A McDonalds under construction in Millau in Southwest France became the target of José Bové and his followers in 1995. Destroying the Golden Arches construction underway was their way to protest "bad food" and resistance to globalization. "Potatoes are now politics," wrote Caroline Frost, and Bové's bail was paid by supporters from across the political spectrum. Jean Glavany, the Agricultural Minister, boasted he had never eaten a hamburger.<sup>16</sup>

The connection between political France and culinary France was on view when internationally famous chef Paul Bocuse was granted the Legion of Honor by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Prominent French chefs prepared the occasion's dinner, with Bocuse creating a new dish, *La Soupe de Truffe VGE*, adding it to his restaurant's menu.

For the 1987 first anniversary of cohabitation (the Chief of state of one political party, the Head of Government of another) Bocuse invented "*Quail Elysée*." Two quail were served, the one on the left stuffed with *foie gras* from Socialist President Mitterand's home region, the one on the right stuffed with the black truffles from RPR Prime Minister Chirac's electoral district.<sup>17</sup> The inventive Bocuse also created *Gateau de Président*, originally to honor President Mitterand. However, it was near the end of his term and the cake, in the spirit of nonpartisanship, gained a name suitable for any incumbent.<sup>18</sup>

Although French fries originated in Belgium (1680) they were assimilated by the French to become a national culinary symbol. France and *frites* are synonymous, and

vary from the humble *allumettes* (matchsticks) to gourmet *pommes soufflées*, served with champagne on special occasions. Frites became a diplomatic messenger to signal America's distress over France's disagreements with policy on confronting Iraq. On menus in Congress and some restaurants, French Fries were offered as Freedom Fries, and French Toast served as Freedom Toast.

During the 1995 presidential campaign apples were associated with Chirac. A stylized apple had appeared on the cover of Chirac's campaign book, *Une Nouvelle France: Réflexions*. A satirical television show (*Les Guignols*, puppets) announced that Chirac's only advice to voters was to "eat apples." His public relations people decided to use it to symbolize his rural identity and sense of humor and distributed apples at meetings. Opponents picked it up to belittle Chirac. One opponent said that Chirac, like apples, changed color daily. Another evaluated his younger supporters as "green apples" while attacking his followers as "licking their apples like wounded animals." Nonetheless he was elected and revelers at his headquarters drank champagne--and ate apples in response to the campaign chants of his opponents, "*manger des pommes*."<sup>19</sup>

Last to be mentioned is food as a symbol of France itself, its culinary traditions and excellence suffusing French civilization. At the 1998 Bordeaux Conference on Food and Politics, food was identified as a political weapon of the Third Republic to overcome France's regional diversity. Priscilla Ferguson perceives gastronomy as part of the evolution of French nationhood, connecting Parisian domination with provincial preservation. Interdependence and railroad development brought the regional products to and through *Les Halles*, the "belly of France," in Paris. Gastronomy's contribution to unity with diversity was to serve in the nationalizing arsenal as a component of national

greatness while preserving regional cuisines. A French meal is not only social and nutritional, it is also a symbol of national, local, and cultural values.<sup>20</sup>

The transcending nature of cuisine in France, despite a history of political turbulence and regime changes, is manifest in De Gaulle's first dinner on the day of the liberation of Paris (August 25, 1944), the City of Light rife with revenge and hatred of her deposed German occupiers and their collaborators. The chef for the meal had recently worked in Vichy for Marshall Pétain. Before the war he had been chef to presidents of the Third Republic. That evening the chef of presidents, recent employee of Vichy, prepared dinner for the leader of the Free French, his culinary skills serving the nation, not its forms of government.<sup>21</sup>

The blending of gastronomy and nationalism, their symbolic, intersecting relationship, is on display in Marcel Rouff's *The Passionate Epicure*. The fictional Dodin is invited to an extravagant dinner of many courses by the epicure "Crown Prince of Eurasia" to impress the famous French gourmet. When the Prince is invited to dinner in return he is served exquisite "dainties," excellent soup and fritters, and *pot au feu* (boiled beef) a common, simple but iconic dish. But neither the boiled beef, nor soup or fritters were common--they were marvels of cookery.

The Prince understood his pompous dinner had been outclassed by masterpieces of the commonplace, prepared by a female cook of peasant origin. Dodin's dinner was short and bourgeois, but a work of art. The fictional Frenchman's dinner represents plain foods elegantly prepared, declaring his nation's culinary superiority over the "barbarians," (his Germanic neighbors) and serving as a reminder of France's triumphant survival despite

her losses in the recent First World-War. Rouff summarizes for us French gastronomic nationalism: "Great noble cookery is a tradition of this country. . . . everywhere else people feed; in France alone do they know how to eat. In France, they have always known how to eat. . . .Light, delicate, learned, and noble, harmonious and precise, clear and logical, the cuisine of France is linked, by mysterious relationships with the genius of her greatest men."<sup>22</sup>

*We have the best gastronomy in the world."*

*Nicolas Sarkozy, February 23, 2008*

## END NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> Ernest Mignon, *Les mots du Général* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1962), 57.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Rosario Scarpato, "Gastronomy as a Tourist Product: The Perspective of Gastronomy Studies, in Anne-Marie Hjalager and Greg Richards, eds., *Tourism and Gastronomy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 52.

<sup>[3]</sup> Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, trans., M. F.K. Fisher, *The Physiology of Taste: Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* (New York: Counterpoint, 1949), 54.

<sup>[4]</sup> See *Ibid*, and Lawrence R. Schehr, and Alan Weiss, eds., *French Food on the Table* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>[5]</sup> A look at the extensive bibliography in Pricilla Parkhurst Ferguson's *Accounting for Taste* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) is an indication of the surge in gastronomy publications: pre-1970, four titles; 1970s ten; 1980s, fourteen; 1990s, sixty-six; 2000s to date, thirty-seven. A Google search lists scores of "hits." In January 1998, a Conference in Bordeaux, France, was held on "Food and Politics." There is a Center for Historical Gastronomy in Brussels, Belgium; a European Institute for the History and Culture of Food in Tours, France; a 2008 Council of Europe Congress in Strasbourg, France, considered "Gastronomy: a Source of Cultural Identity." The focus of the gathering was the history, traditions, identities, diversities, and emotions conveyed by gastronomy. Presentations included "Gastronomy and National Identities in Europe"; "The Roots and Evolution of Culinary Cultures"; "Globalization Adds Value to Products of the Terroir." See <http://www.culture-food/eu/en/programme-congress>

<sup>[6]</sup> Christine Barbour, "Interface: Christine Barbour," is a political science professor who teaches a course on "Food and Politics." <http://www.rimag.com/index.asp?layoutarticlePrint&/article/D>. For an outline of the Indiana program see [www.indiana.edu/~anthro/food](http://www.indiana.edu/~anthro/food).. Boston University Metropolitan College and the School of Oriental and African Studies-University of London have master degree programs in gastronomy. See [www.bu.edu/met/adult\\_college\\_programs/graduate\\_school\\_program/postgraduate\\_degree/food\\_science\\_de/index](http://www.bu.edu/met/adult_college_programs/graduate_school_program/postgraduate_degree/food_science_de/index).; [www.soas.ac.uk/foodstudies](http://www.soas.ac.uk/foodstudies). Boston College's MA in Liberal

Arts in Gastronomy includes a course on "Cuisine and Culture in France," studying cuisine and cultures relationship between a place, a people, and their food ways.

<sup>7</sup> Savoy has said a listing will protect *charcutiers*, cheese producers, wine makers, and *patissiers*. [www.times.mescorrespondents.typepad.com/charles-bremmer/2008//02-toi-casse](http://www.times.mescorrespondents.typepad.com/charles-bremmer/2008//02-toi-casse).

<sup>8</sup> See also [www.gadling.com/2006/03/sarkozy-wants-french-cuisine-on-unesco-world-heritage](http://www.gadling.com/2006/03/sarkozy-wants-french-cuisine-on-unesco-world-heritage). The seventy-seven page report is available on [www.senat.fr-rap-107-440r107-4401.pdf](http://www.senat.fr-rap-107-440r107-4401.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> [www.atable.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/10/16-culinaire](http://www.atable.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/10/16-culinaire).

<sup>10</sup> See "sondage: Le France mange au centre," *Gault Millau*, October, 1987, 67, 71. See also SOFRES, "*Les goûts alimentaires des Français*," booklet, 1984. Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste*, 12. Roland Frank, "Polls Apart," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 10, 1988, section 6, and [www.answers.com/topic/food-as-symbol](http://www.answers.com/topic/food-as-symbol), and Barthes "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," in Robert Foster and Orst Ranum, *Food and Drink in History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1979). A fundraiser was held for John McCain in Gretna, Nebraska, on August 16, 2008, for wealthy Republican backers who paid \$1,000 each to dine on smoked salmon and orange glazed chicken. Supporters of Barack Obama held a cook-out nearby, selling hotdogs for \$5.00 to represent party differences. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 17, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> On restaurants and politics see Odile Grand, "*Politiques: leurs restaurants d'élection*," *Gault Millau*, January, 1988, 41-45. Telephone calls to the two restaurants on the author's behalf by the French Cultural Services of the Consulate General in Chicago on June 24 and 26, 1994, confirmed Le Pen's continued unacceptable presence.

<sup>12</sup> [www.whitings-writings.com/bistro\\_reviews/artisanal](http://www.whitings-writings.com/bistro_reviews/artisanal).

<sup>13</sup> Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> See Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste*, 151-152. See Peter Farb and George Amelagos, *Consuming Passion: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Company, 1980), 154-155; Jean-Robert Pitte, *French Gastronomy: The History of a Passion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 128-122.

<sup>15</sup> Although Catherine de Medicis oft noted role of influencing French cuisine's development in the sixteenth century has been challenged as a myth, she did set a precedent for political banquets as political tools when she made a lavish banquet tour de France in 1564 to encourage unity and loyalty to her son, the young Charles IX. Jean-François Revel, *Cuisine and Culture: A Journey Through the History of Food* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), 117-145. Also Barbara Ketchman Wheaton, *Savoring the Past: the French Kitchen and Table from 1300 to 1787* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 43-50.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Frost, "José Bové: A Profile," [www.bbc.uk/bbcfour/documentary/profile\\_bove](http://www.bbc.uk/bbcfour/documentary/profile_bove). See also [www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/sep//jonhenley](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/sep//jonhenley). On Le Pen's comment see Michel Faure, "Carnet de campagne," *L'Express*, 16 mars, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> *Journal français d'Amérique*, 1-2 3 avril, 1987.

<sup>18</sup> Explained to the author during a visit to Bernachons, Lyons, France, in 1999.

<sup>19</sup> E-mail to the author in answer to the question, "Why Apples?" L.P. Groused, frenchtalk@list.crenlist.net and cchaumet@pratique.fr. See Michael Faure, "RPR: des pommes encore vertes" *L'Express*, 4 mai, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Schehr and Alan J. Weiss, eds., *French Food on the Table* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste*, 4-8, 122-123.

<sup>21</sup> Related in Don Cook, *Charles De Gaulle* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983), 247-248.

<sup>22</sup> Marcel Rouff, trans, Claude, *The Passionate Epicure* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 162.