

# The Seductions of Food

by Lis Harris

I was in my twenties in Paris when I had my first glimpse of what I believe was the dawn of the new age of American gastronomic exploration (the predawn was known to the so-called lost generation—but Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and the rest were too alcohol befogged to pay much attention to what was on their plates). Playing hooky from the painting classes I was supposed to be attending, I sat in on the far more revelatory cooking lectures of the Cordon Bleu culinary school. Nearly all the students were young Americans with a determined look in their eyes, or long-stemmed Brits who seemed to be undergoing some kind of culinary-religious conversion. The chef whose classes I attended was amusingly pedantic, moody (he actually indulged in tantrums when his pink-cheeked assistant brought him produce he deemed inferior), and fond of lapsing into lengthy disquisitions on the chemistry of the onions and pears he would hold aloft before us like sacred icons. I learned to make a *gâteau de riz* and savory stews with varieties of mushrooms that would not become available in the United States for more than two decades. Some of the students were hoping to open restaurants back home, and French cuisine was the gospel they intended to preach.

My rapt exploration of French gastronomy continued when I found a job with a European art magazine. Weekends, with not always happy results, I'd plunk down the larger part of my nearly nonexistent wages at some Paris restaurant mentioned fondly in the essays of A. J. Liebling, the *New Yorker* writer and trencherman who was my hero. At a famous restaurant near the Bourse that Liebling frequented, I ordered one of his favorite dishes: *tripe à la mode de Caen*. I'd never before laid eyes on the dish, much less sniffed it, and when it was placed before me with a flourish (it was the restaurant's specialty), its acrid smell nearly made me gag. All around me were well-tailored, prosperous-looking bankers and waiters who resembled philology professors. I certainly couldn't eat the dish—or send it back. What to do? As if in a dream, my hand moved to open the clasp of my pocketbook, and, when the waiter turned his back, I dumped the entire contents of the plate into my purse, a gesture that awes me to this day.

A few years later, I made what turned out to be a quasi-comical pilgrimage to the towns and cities of France highlighted on 10 regional culinary maps provided by the foreign correspondent and food scholar Waverly Root in his delightful *The Food of France*. Though Root published the book in 1958, most of his recollections unfortunately reached back to the 1920s, and many, if not most, of my inquiries at the small villages I sought out specifically to taste a *milliard*—a special kind of cherry tart—or carp in wine sauce were met with a shrug and a shake



*The real revolutionary of the 1960s? Julia Child, on her television show The French Chef.*

of the head, or, less often, a dim recollection. Oh yes, a certain Mme. T. sometimes served that in her restaurant, 10 kilometers away, on Fridays. But the restaurant, regrettably, had just closed for vacation. If we Americans were moving at that point toward the discovery of Real Food, the French were disengaging incrementally from some of their oldest regional traditions, a process stalled but not entirely arrested by the Slow Food Movement, the by-now international eco-gastronomic association that originated in Italy in 1986 and is dedicated to preserving the taste and regional integrity of products and dishes in danger of disappearing.

Alice Waters, the owner of the much admired Chez Panisse restaurant in Oakland, California, and avatar of the support-your-local-farmer-and-buy-organic-whenever-possible movement, has many times told interviewers that when she traveled to Paris in that same period, the 1960s, she had “an awakening.” That’s probably how a great many young Americans felt who studied or traveled then in France. They came back with a new appreciation of the importance of fresh

ingredients and foods grown to *taste* good rather than merely *look* good, and with a heightened sense of how choices made about food could affect the fabric of their lives. The country they came home to, alas, was not yet ready to accommodate them. The culinary landscape of the United States at the time (except for great local establishments that were mostly unknown to outsiders, and certain temples of gastronomy in New Orleans and a few other major cities) was still pretty much dominated by the shrimp cocktail and the T-bone steak.

**B**ut it would be hard not to notice the great leap forward in American culinary sophistication that has occurred over the past two or three decades—taking us from Dipsy Doodles to *pain au chocolat*, and from chop suey as almost the only foreign game in town to a virtual United Nations of gastronomic choice. The circumstances driving this change are no secret: a spike in immigration from diverse cultures with assimilation-resistant culinary traditions, faster ways of transporting foods, more adventurous palates developed over decades of relatively unimpeded travel, and, to some extent, the determination of the post-World War II generation to incorporate into their lives the best of everything: houses, cars, clothes, and food. Our avowed ideals in the realms of education and health care may be receding further and further from sight, but here is one area, however modest, in which we have progressed: The current generation regards a good cup of coffee and crusty bread as inalienable rights. And that would have been inconceivable 25 years ago.

The supermarkets that have largely replaced the local grocery stores where our grandparents shopped clearly reflect our changing tastes, as do the restaurants where we like to eat. Foods that would have been considered exotic a couple of decades ago—sushi, pad thai, radicchio, balsamic vinegar, raw-milk cheeses from remote European hamlets—look as familiar in our shopping carts as boxes of Jell-O. And even that humble iconic staple has needed readjustment. Whereas our mothers were warned against adding pineapple to their Jell-O molds because it would prevent them from setting, today's cooks are additionally warned not to throw in any bits of kiwi, ginger root, papaya, or fig. Americans are working harder and eating out more, but they're also lavishing more money on pots and pans and expensive kitchen gadgets that they may or may not use. In 1999, they spent more than \$1 billion on cookware, yet chances are they'll be repairing to it less frequently than they will to their takeout Croissan'wich, their everything bagel, their mesclun salad, or their chips and guacamole—which they may comfortably down in front of their TVs while watching celebrity chefs on the Food Network. And though the market for convenience foods has boomed, many consumers are at least pretending that they go home to cook: In 1998 (the latest year for which statistics are available), 1,060 cookbooks were published in the United States. Even in households where the elaborate home-cooked meal is only a dim memory, a handsome array of cookbook spines neatly aligned along a kitchen shelf is commonplace.

The entrance of organic foods into the marketplace, which also

>LIS HARRIS is an associate professor at the Columbia University School of the Arts and a former staff writer for *The New Yorker*. Her most recent book is *Tilting at Mills: Green Dreams, Dirty Dealings and the Corporate Squeeze* (2003). Copyright © 2003 by Lis Harris.

occurred during the 1970s and '80s, was associated at first with radical politics, feminism, and back-to-the-land communes. And for the most part, the shriveled carrots and desiccated lettuces that showed up in markets were simply manifestations of the marginality of the counterculture: Not on our counters! But Julia Child, whose TV show, beginning in the early 1960s, brought French cooking to the multitudes, became mainstream. Child made the more-than-a-little-intimidating idea of mastering the complexities of the cuisine seem like fun, and, when she dropped something big on the floor and shrugged it off with a wisecrack, even slapstick fun. But she didn't really address

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the growing concern about where and how the foods she so cheerfully flung about were grown. If the tomato she sliced into had little resemblance, sadly, to its homelier, tastier French (or Italian) cousin, or the "nice" joint of beef she recommended was suffused with antibiotics and hormones, well, there was only so much she could do. Alice Waters was not a TV performer, and thus affected fewer people initially, but she had in her sights both complex cooking techniques and the big questions about food safety and healthfulness and the impact of our eating habits on those who supply our food. (One unintended side effect of the new demand for exotic fare is the ecological danger it can sometimes pose, as is the case with the Chilean sea bass, which, in the course of a few years, has nearly become extinct.)

The "buy local" movement turned out to be more than merely a romantic, Luddite idea. (Nowadays most produce travels 1,500 to 2,500 miles and can take a week or two to reach American plates, and much of its freshness and taste is lost en route.) The well-publicized preference of contemporary chefs for buying locally, choosing organic foods when possible, supporting regional farmers, and rejecting the stiff formalities of the traditional French restaurant has changed the tone of restaurants across the country. The state of the economy also affects public eating habits: Boom times spawn restaurants with high pretensions and prices to match; lean times inspire eateries with names like "Bob's." The sorts of people drawn to the culinary world in recent decades—former investment bankers, English professors, biologists—have changed, too. In a world dominated by technology, the sensual directness of cooking has great appeal. Courses on food culture have even proliferated in the academy: Some 300 anthropologists in the United States specialize in food studies.

Traditional culinary institutes continue to graduate many of the nation's chefs, but many others have not attended those institutes, and young chefs drawn increasingly to a more homegrown way of looking at what they do have disengaged from the fancy, three-fork French restaurant tradition. Today there's scarcely a major American city that can't boast restaurants serving extraordinarily good food, and, according to Bob Evans, the chef and owner of Hugo's, in Portland, Maine, even smaller metropolises such as his are likely to have



*No longer meant only for eating, food is increasingly an object of voyeuristic consumption.*

at least one first-class eating establishment. On a cold winter day, most of Evans's patrons clump into his restaurant in heavy boots and anoraks and peel down to plaid shirts and thick, sensible sweaters, but the food they eat betrays the background of a chef who trained with Thomas Keller at the French Laundry in Yountville, California, one of the best restaurants in the country. Evans's goal, which he believes is shared by many of the chefs he knows, is to bring the highest standard of cooking and the freshest local ingredients to his restaurant, while making certain that customers regard what he offers them as "approachable."

But however wholehearted the attitude of American chefs toward their métier, it is still light-years removed from the Michelin- and GaultMillau-terrorized, perfection-seeking universe of the chefs of France. It's unimaginable that even the most obsessive American chef would suffer the fate of poor Bernard L'Oiseau, who shot himself to death in the winter of 2003 after learning that the GaultMillau guide had dropped his popular restaurant, Côte d'Or, in Burgundy, from a rating of 19 points (out of 20) to 17—for being inad-

equately “dazzling.” L’Oiseau fared better with the Michelin inspectors, who let him keep his three stars, but they too rendered an apparently insupportable blow when they let him know that his clientele was getting a little bored seeing the same dishes on his menu. And few Americans, even die-hard foodies, would think of expending as much energy as the French group De la Question Gourmande has, trying to get Pope John Paul II to remove *gourmandise* (gluttony) from the list of seven deadly sins.

Less droll was the fury aroused in France—in 1999, long before the war in Iraq—by the American government’s decision to slap duties of 100 percent on many French imports, including Roquefort cheese, mustard, foie gras, and truffles. The United States apparently levied the tax in response to the decision by the European Union (EU) to ban imports of hormone-treated U.S. beef. At first, French farmers protested only the high duties, but in time they turned their attention as well to the larger issue of globalization, which was fostered by the United States, they said, and threatened regional products and the farmers’ traditional way of life. Equally important, the protests highlighted problems raised by the American go-go attitude toward agribusiness and the bioengineering of food.

Waters has just such matters in mind when she talks about a new way of focusing on how our understanding of food and the choices we make as consumers affect the people who grow food and the land on which it’s grown. She has characterized this new approach as a “delicious revolution.” *Revolution* was also the word used not long ago by a food service executive quoted in *The New York Times* to describe the changing (decidedly for the better) food tastes and cosmopolitan habits of college students across the country. Like the students of a New York City private school that hired a chef from the Culinary Institute to prepare its cafeteria meals and provide a nutritious, junk-free diet, the college students not only lapped up the better food but grew more and more unwilling to eat any other kind.

**B**ut wait. Intriguing as these changes may be, do they really qualify as revolutionary? A very minor revolution, perhaps, in a rather small principality. What has been truly revolutionary over the same period is the genetic modification of our foods. It was acknowledged as such in January 1998 by the protesting farmers of the Confédération Paysanne, the second largest union of French farmers, when they destroyed sacks of genetically modified maize. Jose Bove, one of the farmers who participated in the event, admitted at his trial that what he and his fellow farmers had done was illegal, but they’d felt, he said, that the way the corn had been imposed on European countries had left them no alternative. “When was there a public debate on genetically modified organisms? When were farmers and consumers asked what they think about this? Never.”

In the United States, about 75 percent of our soybeans and 34 percent of our corn are now grown from genetically modified (GM) seeds, and our supermarket shelves overflow with products made with GM crops. But we have as yet no way of gauging the long-term effects of GM foods—maize, soybeans, wheat, bananas, and the rest—on the environment, animals, and humans, and that’s the danger. Europeans have so far taken such concerns far more seriously than Americans have, which has led to an increasingly tense dispute over the trade in GM foods.

Yet almost without our noticing, complex public-health issues involving

food have also burgeoned in the United States. Over the past few decades, while Waters's "delicious revolution" was taking place, a major threat to our good health developed: We became very, very fat. This may not qualify as a revolution, but it's certainly a cause for alarm. Sixty-five percent of Americans are overweight, and nearly half of these people are considered obese. (More than five million Americans are sufficiently obese to qualify for a draconian surgical technique, "gastroplasty," in which the stomach is surgically altered to keep food from being digested.) As a result, these individuals are suffering, or will probably suffer in time, from diabetes or ailments of the pulmonary or cardiovascular systems. The condition has become so widespread and alarming that, four years ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified obesity as an epidemic.

How did this happen? Medical journal articles, newspaper reports, and books have scrutinized this great American burgeoning, and though it may seem counterintuitive, given what is supposed to be our national obsession with physical fitness, the big story is that a powerful combination of social, economic, agricultural, and—hugely—market forces have caught too many Americans in a nasty trap.

The persuasive collective narrative includes many players. One was the optimistic and ever colorful Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture under President Richard Nixon. Butz, who was known for (and forced to resign because of) tasteless jokes, encouraged intensive corn production and helped usher in the era of widespread use of high-fructose corn syrup—six times sweeter than sugar and far less expensive—in hundreds of thousands of convenience foods and pastries, and most soft drinks. To keep Malaysia, a major palm oil producer, as a U.S. friend and global trading partner, Butz encouraged the importation of palm oil, which has seven percent more saturated fat than lard. Though its use in commercial cooking (in fast-food restaurants, for example, to cook French fries) has declined, palm oil has been clogging arteries across the land ever since.

Among the other players are the schizophrenically divided U.S. regulatory system, which is guided by the traditional pro-business attitudes of the Department of Agriculture and dependent for enforcement on a perpetually understaffed and underfunded Food and Drug Administration, and the food industry's aggressive marketers, who have long promoted

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bigness, supersizing, More!, etc., and have made gorging a national pastime. Fast-food chains, Saturday morning TV commercials pushing junk food, and "cute" characters such as Ronald McDonald have had a particularly disastrous impact on children: Twenty-five percent of all Americans under 19 are either overweight or obese; since 1980, the rates of overweight have doubled among small children, and tripled among adolescents. Our growing national hurriedness and its handmaiden, food prepared away from home, have also been part of the story. In 1970, 25 percent of the U.S. consumer food dollar was spent on food prepared outside



*Only in America? “Competitive eating” now has its own international federation.*

the home; in 1999, the figure was 40 percent—and much of that food, fast or otherwise, was increasingly fat infused and increasingly caloric.

**U**mbilically attached to computer games and to softly glowing TVs bar-raging them with snack cues, many children haven’t a chance. Studies have shown that the more time spent watching TV, the fatter the child. Among city children, the poor are particularly vulnerable because their parents, away at work, want them at home, not roaming around (it used to be called playing) in unsafe neighborhoods. Weight problems, unsurprisingly, are more prevalent among the poor, though of late obesity has been making inroads into the middle class.

Just as our educational and health-care systems are divided absolutely along class and economic lines, so, too, are our changing eating habits, and no one has much of a grip on the problem. As far back as 1988, George Bush *père* appointed Arnold Schwarzenegger, a fitness enthusiast and self-made Hercules, to head the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. But much to his chagrin, even Schwarzenegger could elicit little more than yawns from national and state bureaucracies when he tried to interest them in doing something about the bad shape of the citizenry.

And what has been the response to the problem, other than a constant flow of diet books and a continuing search for the perfect antifat pill? A lawsuit! Having chewed reflectively for a while on the success of suits against the tobacco industry, Sam Hirsch, a New York City attorney, decided to file a suit against McDonald’s on behalf of children, alleging that the chain “negligently, recklessly, and intentionally pushes on children foods that are high in salt, sugar, fat, and cholesterol.” Inspired by the apparent success of the tobacco suits, visions of mass tort disputes involving countless fast-food companies are undoubtedly dancing in the heads of more than a few lawyers, along with visions of attractive fees, but



at least for the moment quite a few of their brethren think the McDonald's suit is pretty silly. Unlike tobacco, junk food isn't addictive, and most people believe that eating habits, however bad, are a personal matter.

Nonetheless, those same lawyers and many food industry executives know very well that some of the same arrows loosed against the tobacco industry, which may eventually be forced to pay \$246 billion to the states, may also be in the quiver of the food suit attorneys. Preeminently, in December 2001 the U.S. Surgeon General noted that the public-health costs deriving from overweight and obesity were approaching \$117 billion annually—a figure not as high as, but certainly closing in on, the estimates for the public-health costs of tobacco (\$140 billion a year). The Surgeon General also disclosed that about 300,000 deaths per year are now associated with overweight and obesity, and that these conditions might in the future be responsible for as much preventable disease and death as smoking.

**T**hough the McDonald's case may seem frivolous, legal analysts have pointed out that once the discovery stage is reached, documents may well emerge, as they did in the tobacco cases, demonstrating that the food-industry companies knew far more than they have admitted about the health impact of their products. The big-food industry companies that would have to spend millions of dollars in legal fees if the suit were ever to be broadened—Coca-Cola, Kraft, and many others—have thus far maintained a granitic silence. But the trade group for the industry, the Grocery Manufacturers of America, has pooh-poohed the lawsuit and dismissed “finger-pointing, reckless accusations, and lawsuits that won't make anyone thinner.” Still, the industry has to be paying close attention. Just recently, a San Francisco lawyer filed a suit against Kraft, the maker of Oreos, seeking to ban the cookies in California because an ingredient, hydrogenated oil, contains unhealthy trans fats, though nowhere on the Oreo package is this revealed.

Even if the McDonald's suit is unsuccessful, the media uproar it has started has already inspired changes in the industry's marketing practices (portion sizes look smaller on boxes, a balanced diet and exercise are recommended along with snacks)—and may well inspire schools to get rid of their junk food vending machines and rethink their commitment to fitness. The suggestion by the director of Yale University's Center for Eating and Weight Disorders that junk food be taxed like liquor and cigarettes—the derisively dubbed “Twinkie Tax”—is already 10 years old and not likely to be taken up anytime soon, but someone had better come up with a realistic way of dealing with the problem before we slurp and lick our way to an even greater national health crisis.

Happily, sweeping changes have regularly characterized eating habits over time. Thus, McDonald's, the belly of the Beast, long ago stopped frying its potatoes in palm oil and now offers low-fat yogurt for dessert, and some California schools no longer allow soft drinks in their vending machines. Who knows? Perhaps the time will come when the Evian sippers and the Whopper chompers will dine as one. If our ancestors could swing down from the trees and evolve to the baguette, anything is possible: The age of pizza and a 32-ounce shake may one day look like an interregnum. □