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Jennifer J. Davis, *Defining Culinary Authority: The Transformation of Cooking in France, 1650-1830*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013. x + 246 pp. Figures, notes, note on currency, bibliography, and index. \$47.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0807145335

Review by Erica J. Peters, Culinary Historians of Northern California.

With food blogs proliferating, it is not hard for us to understand the impulse to tell others about our culinary discoveries. Cooks under the Ancien Regime and their brethren in the early nineteenth century, as well as the post-revolutionary figure of the gastronome, saw writing about food as a way to earn respect and make names for themselves. Then as now, however, there were other cooks too busy making a living to write about it. *Defining Culinary Authority* tells us about both kinds of figures in a fascinating narrative covering almost two centuries of French history. Jennifer J. Davis weaves together social and cultural history, highlighting the evolving relationship between culinary labor and culinary artistry. In chapters two, four, and six, Davis goes deep into archival records to uncover the lives and voices of ordinary cooks, while the alternating chapters showcase debates in the cultural sphere around gender and taste, providing context for the cooks' options and choices.

In chapter two, the author compares cooking taking place on eighteenth-century country estates to urban cooking under the dominion of three guilds: the roast cooks, the pastry cooks, and the cook-caterers. Generally, aspiring young cooks came from the countryside, eager to gain access to a trade built on strong social networks. They began with the hardest manual labor, hoping to move up to marketing and prep work, and eventually to master the cook's craft. In elite households, both male and female servants might spend years just washing dishes. If they did move up, male cooks might achieve some respect as professionals, while noble employers often suspected women of stealing from the kitchen budget in order to primp and attract a husband.

In the cities, guild apprentices acquired real training in how to prepare and serve food to please "the most delicate tastes" (p. 65). Mostly men, they gained cooking skills much faster than the female servants who often helped in the same urban kitchens. Women were rarely allowed into the cooking guilds unless they were raised in a guild family, but often became professional cooks through marriage. Davis notes that women were especially noted for their skill at retaining paying customers. A widowed cook could stay in the business unless she remarried someone who was not in the guild. As these examples suggest, the culinary guilds treated women as an important part of a functioning business.

Chapter four focuses on cross-guild conflicts and alliances. Davis shows, for instance, that the first "restaurateur" to claim the name, Mathurin Roze de Chantoiseau, was accused in 1767 of illicitly serving food without authorization from the caterers' guild.[1] The book includes many such cases, illustrating how urban cooks maneuvered among complex regulations, business relationships, and protection rackets to make a living. They confronted customers who wanted meat on fast days, others who tried to abscond without paying, and police investigators summoned by a rival guild to seize a steaming hot meal. (On one occasion we learn that the dishes were sold to benefit the poor, but the reader is otherwise left to imagine many happy post-raid meals at police headquarters.)

Chapters one and three provide the changing cultural context for a cook's career. In her first chapter Davis discusses the seventeenth-century culinary penchant for disguising foods and treating the resulting artifice as evidence of culinary genius. Such "disguises" referred as much to the complex sauces covering the basic components of a dish as to the grand spectacle of peacocks dressed in their gorgeous feathers or root vegetables shaped into a fish. She then presents the eighteenth-century reaction to artifice, in the form of "natural cuisine" which made universalist claims but was hard to explain and market, and the more successful terms, "cuisine moderne" and "nouvelle cuisine." *Cuisine moderne* referenced new approaches to chemistry and public health. Cookbook writers combined universal-sounding scientific and aesthetic standards with assertions of culinary originality. Davis focuses here on Vincent La Chapelle's praise of chemistry and novelty in cooking, writing that "the truly modern cook strove to imagine new dishes, new methods, and new presentations" (p. 29). Even as they promoted an elegant simplicity in presentation, the new crop of author-cooks also claimed responsibility for shaping and perfecting the public's tastes.[2]

In chapter three, Davis engages with the literature on the public sphere, arguing persuasively that cookbooks were part of "a commercialized public sphere" (p. 69). Grand displays at noble banquets no longer set the tone for culinary fashions. By the mid-eighteenth century, simplicity had become a touchstone for cookbook authors like Menon, aiming at a broader audience. If elites wanted to eat less fancy food, then non-elite cooks would need cookbooks to learn the new, secular techniques. The rhetoric of "science" was still there in cookbooks aimed at male cooks, but in *La cuisinière bourgeoise* (1746), Menon promised women no complicated recipes, focusing instead on "simple, good and new dishes, for which I provide intelligible explanation" (p. 82). Culinary historians have tended to read Menon's adjective "bourgeoise" through the lens of class, but Davis demonstrates that it referred instead to urban cooks with access to "abundant and organized markets" (p. 80). Cooks arriving from the countryside needed to learn what to do with these new products and how to prepare them according to changing city fashions. A new crop of cookbooks aimed to provide that education in place of the slower guild-based training.

Chapter five picks up the story after the Revolution, as the Théâtre du Vaudeville began questioning the French state's "liberal ideas of labor and market organization" (p. 113). The free market seemed likely to lead to social disorder: As staged in one 1796 play, the master of the house did not even have his wife's company at the breakfast table. The post-revolutionary popularity of restaurants threatened the livelihood of caterers and other cooks, as did women's ability to cook professionally in their own right since the Revolution abolished all guilds. Women also expressed new interest in hearing what other women had to say about taste and the domestic sphere, opening up new opportunities for female authors.

Grimod de la Reynière receives an extended analysis in chapter five, since his *Almanach des gourmands* (published annually 1804–1812) fits well within the commercialized public sphere first discussed in chapter three. Grimod wrote his first volume as social criticism, bemoaning his contemporaries' culinary indulgences and the idea of a free market, but he learned there was a market for a more serious guide to Parisian food retailers. His descriptions (while still witty) became less disdainful and more informative, whether discussing Rouget's inventive pastries on the rue de Richelieu or the fashionable "fork lunches" at Madame Hardy's café on the Boulevard des Italiens. In Davis's reading, Grimod may have adjusted his tone but he still looked back nostalgically to a time when the patriarchal family stood at the center of society: "Sons who aided their fathers, wives who obeyed their husbands, fathers of large families, children who maintained their fathers' legacy, and widows who carried on their husbands' work formed the sentimental foundation of the Almanach's ideal commerce" (p. 133).

At one point, Davis contrasts her own political reading of Grimod with other historians' view of him as apolitical, though the distinction seems somewhat overblown. Others have shown him weaving in social criticism, always with an eye to government censorship.[3] Given the early-nineteenth-century regime of textual controls, Grimod's references to police and municipal authorities watching out for the public's health should probably not be taken at face value.

Gastronomes like Grimod claimed to be “disinterested critics of the culinary public sphere” (p. 141), and yet Davis hints at the potential corruption tainting his listings. When Grimod wrote that only one Parisian merchant had decent wines and dismissed other wine dealers as “hopeless dispensers of poison” (p. 125), it is possible that his entertaining hyperbole concealed the possibility that he was promoting a generous donor. At this distance, it seems impossible to determine the financial arrangements Grimod may have had with his preferred merchants. Davis notes that the gastronome admitted freely that he never paid for the wares he sampled and downgraded tradespeople who would not give him free samples.

In chapter six, the author describes a temporary alliance that took place between the sciences and the cooking trades under the Directory. Scientists used the alliance to demonstrate their usefulness to society, and cooks appreciated the rhetorical help “associating science, labor, and citizenship with masculinity” (p. 165). Davis describes three fields where science affected how people cooked in the early nineteenth century: food preservation, industrial advances in bouillons, and improvements in the techniques for gelatin extraction. Many culinary inventors (all male) petitioned the French government to subsidize their creative efforts to preserve foods, or to industrialize the production of bouillon cubes. Officials rejected most, although they took an interest in Nicolas Appert and supported his research into heating food in sealed glass jars, the groundwork for the modern canning industry.

Meanwhile, caterers and grocers (including Appert) sold bouillon tablets to an urban public eager for a simpler, faster way to make stock without a full kitchen and a sizable meat budget. The celebrity chef Carême declared that the most savory broth resulted from beef simmering for hours over low heat, but many people preferred Madame Gacon-Dufour’s advice in her *Manuel complet de la maîtresse de maison* to rely on Appert’s bouillon tablets instead. Davis reports that even Appert’s significant negotiating skills did not keep him from being evicted from his government-funded workshop after fourteen years. He promised a new method for extracting gelatin from bones, but the state chose not to support his work. The state may not have been interested, but Paris hospitals turned to gelatin as a way to supplement the watery meat bouillon they served their patients. The great advocate of this approach, the chemist Jean-Pierre Joseph d’Arcet, nevertheless thought other changes were even more important for improving the patients’ diet: replacing “the bad female cooks ordinarily employed in hospitals with good male cooks who have retired from working and, benefiting from a small stipend, are easily found without great expense” (p. 161). In fact, hospitals paid men more. Believing male cooks deserved a higher salary, hospital administrators often chose to make do with more affordable women cooks.

Unfortunately Davis was not able to engage with Sean Takats’s recent study of cooks in the French Enlightenment. The two books complement each other well. While both analyze cookbooks and other culinary literature, Takats looks at cooks in domestic service through employment ads, kitchen design, and household accounts, where Davis focuses more on guild cooks, as revealed in police reports and other government archives. I hope to see them build on each other’s work, exploring when and where cooks destabilized gender structures and how their social position shifted over time.[4]

Davis concludes with a look at the tragic tale of François Vatel, maître-d’hôtel for the prince of Condé. Vatel killed himself in 1671 when the service for a royal visit did not meet his standards. The way that story evolved over the centuries illuminates changing French concerns, as does Vatel’s emergence as the symbol of French cooks, when he himself did not cook. In particular, Davis’s treatment of the gendered resonances of Eugène Scribe’s play “Vatel, ou le petit-fils d’un grand homme” (1825), is so ingenious and subtle that it resists retelling here. As Davis notes, writers sometimes acknowledged that “the great difference between men’s and women’s cooking lies not in talent or essential difference but in access to resources and education” (p. 180). Women found ways to cook professionally despite these obstacles, and they contributed to the idea of French culinary taste, albeit from the margins. After the Revolution, urban cooks and culinary writers helped invent the country’s culinary tradition of excellence, imposing contemporary values onto the Ancien Regime as part of a concerted effort to legitimize France as a leader among nations. Davis’s study enriches our understanding of how gender, taste, and the city influenced the new French nation.

## NOTES

[1] Davis seems here to have unearthed the case Rebecca L. Spang declared missing at the start of her important book, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 9-11, 270 n. 27; see also 251 n. 1 for Spang's comment that Boulanger may be an alternate name for Roze de Chantoiseau.

[2] For more on *cuisine moderne*, see Susan Pinkard, *A Revolution in Taste: The Rise of French Cuisine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 156-77; Sean Takats, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), pp. 95-124; and E. C. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 25-28; 240-248.

[3] For instance, Spang, pp. 158-9.

[4] Takats, pp. 14-21.

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