

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF 'CUISINE'

The contemporary French definition of 'cuisine' in the Trésor de la Langue Française covers four different but interrelated meanings: 'cuisine' is not only the act of preparation of foods and the art of such preparation ("préparation des aliments; art, manière d'apprêter les aliments"), but may also refer to the place of preparation, the personnel of this place and the dishes thus prepared.¹

As appropriated by the English language, the term is slightly more restrictive, the relevant interpretation of 'cuisine' being "manner or style of cooking".² Now, while 'style of cooking' might be almost synonymous with the French "art, manière d'apprêter les aliments", 'manner of cooking' is more closely approximated in French by 'mode de cuisson', the way in which the food is cooked - by boiling, roasting, or any of the secondary processes (grilling, braising, steaming) which can find a niche in the 'culinary triangle' of Lévi-Strauss (who, incidentally, makes an implicit distinction between 'mode de cuisson' and 'cuisine').³ The subtle difference between these two is paralleled, in the English language, by that between 'cooking' and the obsolescent 'cookery', which term emphasises the art of cooking.

'Cuisine' properly refers to the whole sequence of operations which culminates in the presentation of prepared food, and represents the transformation of raw ingredients (whether by cooking or marinating, with or without additional ingredients) and their synthesis into a new whole. It goes beyond 'cooking' or 'mode de cuisson', and at the same time excludes the logical consequence and ultimate phase, the actual eating of the food. Thus cuisine entails selection among the availability of material resources (which include implements and fuels as well as ingredients); preparation of ingredients, which usually but not necessarily includes cooking; and serving the finished dish. It corresponds to what Françoise Sabban has described as 'l'élaboration des plats', a complex series of operations from choice of ingredients to final service.⁴

Yet even this explanation is inadequate, since the term 'cuisine' is effectively valueless unless a qualification is added (my cuisine, French cuisine, nineteenth-century cuisine), thus extending its meaning to refer to the manner, art and style of the ensemble of processes.⁵ This ultimate interpretation of 'cuisine', which necessarily implies the exercise of options, the expression of preferences, has been adopted throughout the present work.

A.L. Kroeber describes 'style' as "a strand in a culture or civilisation: a coherent, self-consistent way of expressing behaviour or performing certain kinds of acts. It is also a selective way: there must be

alternative choices, though actually they may never be elected. Where compulsion or physical or physiological necessity reign, there is no room for style".⁶ To the extent that it relates to aesthetic qualities, 'style' is considered characteristic of the fine arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and music) but it may also characterise dress and food, the primary functions of which are purely utilitarian, thereby segregating, on the one hand, Fashion ('la Mode', in the terminology of Roland Barthes) and on the other, cuisine.⁷ As an expression of conscious choice, cuisine may justifiably be considered an art, as Athenaeus proposed: " The cook and the poet are alike; the art of each lies in his brain."⁸ Carême similarly envisaged cuisine among the fine arts, proposing 'pâtisserie' as a branch of architecture, and Brillat-Savarin hinted as much when he conceived *Gastérea* as the goddess of Gastronomy, to be counted among the classical Muses.⁹ And as an art, it is illustrative of a culture; for Fernand Braudel, the recipes which document a cuisine are "des biens culturels".¹⁰

From this point of view, a study of cuisine will emphasise its non-utilitarian aspects, but it should be remembered that cuisine, like Janus, has two faces. Cuisine combines both nutritional and non-nutritional functions; it not only satisfies physical needs but, beyond these, gratifies sensual and intellectual desires and fulfils various symbolic and ritual roles. According to Lévi-Strauss, cuisine is thus "situated between nature and culture, (and) ensures the necessary articulation of

one with the other. It belongs to both domains."¹¹ The ambiguity in the terms used to describe cooking processes is, he believes, evidence of the dual nature of cuisine; roasting, as Lévi-Strauss interprets it, is associated both with raw, on the inside, and cooked, on the outside.¹²

CUISINE: RESOURCES + PEOPLE

The nature/culture duality is but another way of expressing the interdependence of the two determinants of cuisine: the raw materials, which not only include ingredients, but also extend to fuels and culinary equipment; and the people who effect their transformation. Like language, which can be considered to come about when people use words (the raw materials) in order to communicate and express ideas, cuisine depends on human intervention. It expresses the preferences of an individual or of a society individual, but the expression of these preferences is circumscribed by the availability of raw materials (which may be of local production, or imported, or both).

Where conscious choice is absent and/or resources severely restricted, the development of a cuisine is highly unlikely. "The appearance of a cuisine, a self-conscious tradition of cooking and eating, implies the confluence of certain material factors - the availability and abundance of ingredients - with a set of attitudes about food and its place in the life of man ...

A cuisine requires a sizable corps of critical, adventuresome eaters.... The eaters must also be sophisticated enough to encourage culinary adventures, and this implies a degree of rational reflection."¹³

(Referring to the richness of Chinese cuisine in the Sung period, Freeman notes also the importance of the "twin revolutions, in agriculture and in commerce".) Freeman's 'cuisine' is obviously not the product of a system of self-sufficiency which effectively imprisons a cuisine within the confines of the farm. Its determinants are more likely to be found in an urban environment than a rural one, in a courtly rather than a peasant society. An abundance and variety of ingredients implies the presence of regular markets or a network of retailers, and the adventuresome eaters are more likely to be found in those reaches of society where constraints neither of time, nor of money, nor of education come between the individual and the enjoyment of eating.

Rather than search for an answer to the Sphinx-like conundrum of which came first, it is more plausible to imagine a coincidence, at a particular point in time, of both the abundance and diversity of ingredients and the adventuresome eaters. By itself, neither of these would suffice to stimulate the appearance of a cuisine, but the human element is possibly the more important; the most bountiful cornucopia will evoke little response in a society where attention to eating is considered irrelevant. Assuming that a diverse and abundant supply of ingredients can be guaranteed, the cuisine of a particular

society will represent an expression of choice according to its riches, its leisure and its educated discrimination; the cuisine of the upper classes of mediaeval society provides an ideal example.

The combination of these three qualities obviously favours the evolution of a cuisine. Wealth minimises material limitations, while leisure implies freedom from the obligation to work, hence celebration. Finally, there is the education which allows discrimination: "Closely related to the requirement that the gentleman (of leisure) must consume freely and of the right kind of goods, there is the requirement that he must know how to consume them in a seemly manner."¹⁴ Greater discrimination goes hand-in-hand with more specialised consumption, which in turn encourages culinary experimentation and innovation. (In this respect, it may be noted that Grimod de la Reynière wrote his Manuel des Amphitryons for the nineteenth-century nouveaux riches, who had money and leisure but lacked the knowledge of how best to use them. Accession to an aristocratic style of cuisine became a symbol of the social conquest of the French bourgeoisie after the Revolution.¹⁵)

However, wealth, leisure and education are rarely absolute qualities; different degrees of wealth, leisure and education can give rise to different cuisines.

DIMENSIONS OF CUISINE

The cuisine of most societies consists of an ensemble of

different strands representing different social classes, different occasions.¹⁶ Not only do these various cuisines demonstrate the differences, they symbolise them. When eating is accorded a certain social relevance, a cuisine may be used to affirm certain social privileges and thus to distinguish hierarchies within a society, or one culture from another. Likewise, those days set apart as non-working days may be associated with special meals, a different cuisine, as illustrated by the tradition of Sunday dinners in Western society, or the sacrificial feasts of ancient pagan communities which became integrated into Christian religious festivals. Further, there may be different cuisines for guests and for family, for celebratory occasions and for everyday. Whatever the basis of differentiation, one cuisine will typically be more expensive, in terms of ingredients, method of preparation and time involved; more sophisticated, demanding more culinary skills, a higher level of craftsmanship; and more decorative, its aesthetic qualities designed to impress.

Various nomenclatures have been proposed to describe the different styles of cuisine which coexist within a society. Typically, they adopt a system of binary opposites to classify two class-related extremes of culinary style. Jean-François Revel opposes 'cuisine savante' and 'cuisine populaire', representing the former as a progressive cuisine which develops through invention and experimentation, although its roots are in the 'cuisine populaire' to which it periodically returns

in the perennial cycle of refinement, exaggeration, decadence.¹⁷ 'Cuisine populaire', intimately linked to nature, the soil and the seasons, is a stable cuisine which relies on oral transmission, whereas progressive cuisine is associated with written recipes, a literate society, towns. Revel's schema emphasises the fluidity of cuisine in another dimension, its continuous evolution over time. Similarly, Laura Verdi's concept of 'cucina evolutiva' represents a mutable cuisine, evolving out of a conscious and continual search for new pleasures, in contrast to a grounded, needs-based 'cucina essenziale'.¹⁸

In discussing the "characteristics of a truly differentiated cuisine marking a society that is stratified culturally as well as politically", Goody introduces the terms 'higher' and 'lower'.¹⁹ Its flexibility and emphasis on relative rather than absolute parameters give Goody's terminology an advantage over those which adopt the unrealistic convention of categorising two extremes. According to Goody, the 'higher' cuisine in a hierarchical society is typically associated with more food, of better quality (for example fresher, fatter, more ripe) and greater complexity of preparation and presentation. Further, it is based on a different range of resources (blood pudding, for example, does not feature in French 'haute cuisine', nor truffles in peasant cuisine').

Historically, these distinguishing features of a 'higher' cuisine can be recognised in ancient Egypt, in

India, in the Abbassid court of Bagdad, in China during the Sung period, in mediaeval England, as Goody's examples illustrate. In all these societies, the development of a 'higher' cuisine was accompanied by the elaboration of codes of etiquette and of hospitality, the evolution of a culinary and gastronomic literature and an interest in dietary and medicinal principles and practices, which intellectual accessories are implicit in Revel's 'cuisine savante'. Rodinson has identified the same characteristics in the 'cuisine princiere' of thirteenth-century Islamic Egypt - its cosmopolitanism (use of exotic ingredients, borrowing of exotic dishes); its richness and ostentation (lavish use of spices); and its complexity of preparation.²⁰ I suggest that the same features which differentiate the 'higher' cuisine in a hierarchical society also serve to differentiate on another plane, similarly characterising feast-day and celebratory cuisine.

In each of these systems of categorisation, one style of cuisine is inspired by pleasure, desire and taste, the other tied to necessity. This fundamental antithesis is at the origin of all indicators of social status; according to Roland Barthes, it is desire which arouses the 'appetit du luxe', and it is desire, or the expression of desire, which distinguishes man.²¹ (Brillat-Savarin said the same in his Aphorism II: "Les animaux se repaissent; l'homme mange; l'homme d'esprit seul sait manger."²²) Cuisine thus derives from the 'appétit du luxe', while the 'appétit naturel', which corresponds to need, finds its

expression in 'alimentation'* . At its extreme, the 'lower' cuisine, 'cuisine populaire' or 'cucina essenziale', can be approximated by 'alimentation', but when there is possibility of choice among ingredients, among methods of preparation and serving, the potential exists for distinctive styles (of cuisine) to emerge, which styles which will reflect the cultural modes and values of the society. Although the circumstances favourable to the differentiation of 'higher' cuisine (wealth, leisure and education) are identical with Freeman's prerequisites for the development of 'cuisine', it does not follow that 'cuisine' is necessarily synonymous with 'higher cuisine' and is found only among the privileged classes. 'Higher' and 'lower', it must be remembered, are comparative terms, not absolutes.

'MEDIAEVAL CUISINE'

The introduction of these concepts of diversification of cuisine, even within a single social group, and of change

* 'Alimentation' refers to the way in which an individual nourishes or sustains himself and implies a satisfying of needs. It is best approximated in English by the term, diet, in its broadest sense. However, since 'diet' also translates 'régime alimentaire', the French 'alimentation' will be retained. Historical studies of 'alimentation' are concerned with average diets, or the diet of the general population.

and development over time tends to make mockery of any system which tries to fix the co-ordinates of cuisine with respect to place, date and social status, in answer to the questions Where? When? By Whom? For Whom? Yet some such frame must be erected if geographical comparisons between regions are to be valid, even if, in the present instance, it tends to obscure the gradual progress of two centuries.

The mediaeval cuisine which is the subject of this study is the 'higher' cuisine of the wealthy - but not necessarily noble - elites in France, Italy and Catalonia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The decision is not arbitrary: there is a cogent and time-honoured reason for focussing attention on the cuisine of this educated, wealthy minority and its cuisine which, by its very nature and its transcendence of mere necessity, becomes an expression of culture. It may be the sign of a decadent culture, a civilisation in decline, as it was in ancient Rome, but its significance is no less valid. On the other hand, the 'lower' cuisine of the mediaeval era was effectively equivalent to 'alimentation', where little, if any, expression of preference was possible.

"Quand nous parlons de grande cuisine, dans le monde d'hier, nous sommes donc toujours du côté du luxe. Reste que cette cuisine recherchée, comme en connaît toute civilisation adulte ..."; and luxury, concluded Braudel, "est le spectacle le plus voyant, le mieux inventorié."²³ This is particularly true for mediaeval cuisine, for which the primary sources are cookery books written for aristocratic and wealthy bourgeois households.

Although choosing to describe the history of the common man, Braudel himself recognised the need to distinguish between the condition of the majority, the general run of mankind, and the privileged minority living in luxury, between the average and the exceptional.²⁴ Bridget Henisch similarly recognised the hierarchies of mediaeval society, viewing mediaeval life in antithetical terms of fast and feast, or scarcity and plenty, which also characterised the annual cycle of food production and the alternances of the Church calendar.²⁵

CUISINE vs. ALIMENTATION: METHODOLOGY

Although Braudel admitted that "luxury is more attractive to the armchair observer today", most studies of people's diets and eating habits - whether by historians, anthropologists or sociologists - have focussed on 'alimentation' to the exclusion of cuisine, on the general rather than the particular.²⁶ "After all," wrote Braudel, "it is sensible to research a majority history".²⁷

In 1961 the editors of the French journal Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations launched an 'Open Enquiry' into all material aspects of life and biological behaviour, starting with the history of food and eating ("l'histoire de l'alimentation").²⁸ It was proposed that the first step should be to identify 'régimes alimentaires' (at the same time recognising two types of diet: the monotonous, based largely on a single staple

food, and the varied), and subsequently to calculate budgets and rations and to quantify diet in terms of energy, protein, fats, etc. The Enquiry was not guided in any particular direction ("elle ira ou elle pourra") but concern for material aspects predominated; it developed into a study of foods eaten, to the exclusion of the subject who eats (since man's eating is not governed by a dietary determinism).²⁹ Despite difficulties in accurately assessing quality and, to a lesser extent, quantity, the contributors to the Enquiry produced impressive tables to illustrate the composition of the average diet, and its nutritional value, for such diverse groups as patients in the hospital of Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle and Gevaudan peasants in the eighteenth century.³⁰

The Annales approach has been favoured by later researchers such as Louis Stouff, who sees the history of food and eating as an indispensable chapter in the total resurrection of the past, without which it would be impossible to gain an understanding of the people, their behaviour and their mentality.³¹ Yet by emphasising nutritional aspects, the 'eating' side is neglected, and 'cuisine' scarcely recognised. This accords with Braudel's concept of material life, of which 'alimentation' is one facet, and which is itself subordinate to economic considerations. Braudel's interpretation tends to place value more on things than on people, more on the raw materials than on the way in which they are used. His concern is to establish the limits of the possible and the

impossible rather than to identify the why and how.³²

'Alimentation', corresponding to the 'appétit naturel', is not synonymous with cuisine, which reflects the 'appétit du luxe'. Thus the methodology of, and the theory behind, the study of 'alimentation' are not necessarily valid for a study of cuisine. As Lucien Febvre argued, "entre les nécessités ... et l'accomplissement de ces nécessités, toujours se glisse 'l'idée', le parti-pris de l'homme. ... Rappelons-nous que, s'il existe une géographie des besoins, il existe, non moins, une psychologie collective."³³

The interpretation adopted in the present work (cuisine is a characteristic style of choosing, preparing and serving foods which expresses the preferences of an individual or group) implies an attempt to identify what, from the total availability of resources, was selected, prepared and served, and how and why they were selected, prepared and served. It thus entails a multi-disciplinary approach. There are few precedents to act as guidelines for an historical and comparative study of cuisines, which is therefore obliged to borrow from other domains. (Perhaps this might be an argument for the introduction of gastronomy as a discipline in its own right.)

Cuisine may appropriately be considered under the banner of 'material culture', which pays more attention to human contributions, how the materials were used or transformed. As a discipline, the history of material culture has not yet developed a solid theoretical base; it is still at the descriptive, data-collecting stage. The

interpretation of this data tends to have been arrogated by social anthropologists, and sociologists, who have developed different theories in response to the whys? left unanswered by materialist historians.³⁴

Unfortunately, these theories are sometimes based on selective or inadequate data. In his application of Elias' theory of the 'civilising process' to the history of eating and taste, Mennell represents the mediaeval period in simplistic and non-realistic terms - "gluttonous gorging and enforced fasting" - and seems not to recognise the possibility of aesthetic values in the foods offered at mediaeval feasts and banquets.³⁵ Braudel also suggests "Pas de cuisine raffinée, en Europe, avant le XVe siècle finissant... Que le lecteur ne se laisse pas éblouir rétrospectivement par tels ou tels festins ... La quantité ostentatoire l'emporte sur la qualité. Il s'agit au mieux d'une luxe de gueule."³⁶ The concept of 'raffiné' is crucial, but I believe - and will subsequently justify this conviction - that many of the recipes in fourteenth-century texts such as Libro della Cucina (Anonimo Toscano), Le Viandier and the Sent Sovi do display a culinary sophistication equal to that of their contemporary counterparts.

In his magisterial work on the 'alimentation' of fourteenth-century Provence, Stouff admitted that "cuisine can, and ought, be the subject of more serious research" (than it has been to date); previous histories of cuisine were, in his opinion, "détestable".³⁷ A history of cuisine should not be "une petite histoire pittoresque",

as Stouff represents past attempts, but neither is it to be confounded with an exercise in detective sleuth for the purpose of discovering the original source of a particular recipe.³⁸ Nonetheless, recipes and cookery books provide much of the basic data; Stouff, to his credit, recognised the importance of cookery books to studies of both cuisine and 'alimentation', and agreed that the cookery of these books was not simply a means of satisfying a basic need but also an art.³⁹ Yet he was unable to step outside his self-imposed limits of 'alimentation', and thus concluded - admittedly on the basis of rather fragmentary documentation - that across the whole of Provençal society, from the most humble to the most influential households, "there does not appear to have been an original Provençal cuisine in the last two centuries of the mediaeval period".⁴⁰ It is incongruous that, despite his implicit recognition of a social hierarchy and 'cuisines de classe', he sought evidence of a single style of cuisine, a cuisine which could be approximated by a basic 'structure' such as he apparently assumes for contemporary Provençal cuisine.

Since Stouff has been unable to discern any originality in mediaeval Provençal cuisine through a study of 'alimentation', it seems sensible to approach cuisine from an opposite direction, by focussing on particularities rather than generalities, minorities rather than majorities, elites rather than the masses. This is in accord with the interpretation of cuisine in the mediaeval period as a 'higher' cuisine. The result may

be a composite of individual tastes, but through this ensemble it may be possible to see a reflection of the cultural values of a society, a period, a place.