Workers’ Lunch Away from Home in the Paris of the Belle Epoque: The French Model of Meals as Norm and Practice

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Abstract  This article expands the anthropological notion of the “proper meal” to account for the quantitative aspects of workers’ lunch away from home in Paris around 1900. It reconstructs the meals’ caloric content and shows that male workers had easier access than their female colleagues to what they considered a full repast. Yet not everybody behaved according to the French model of the structured meal, namely, appetizer, entrée, and dessert. A full-fledged takeout food sector offered alternatives to the French model and allowed consumers to distance themselves from norms. Many French scholars have accepted the canonical dietary model as self-evident, which has led to neglect of this more informal food space where cultural rules exerted a weaker hold on eating behavior. Attention to the cultural importance and the material content of the commercial midday meal around 1900 offers a starting point to examine the developments of food practices and body weights in the twentieth century.

Keywords consumption, working class, gender, social norms, belle époque

Historical research has shed light on the genesis of the so-called French dietary model, namely, a structured lunch and dinner of appetizer, entrée, and a dessert. Jean-Paul Aron showed the passage to the three-course menu over the course of the early nineteenth century, and Claude Grignon delineated the compromises between a bourgeois way of life and a multitude of popular (food) cultures that resulted in the pattern of three daily meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner) by 1900. Both developments normalized social rhythms. For one, the timetable of eating helped industrializing society link the replenishment of its members to its economic tempos and imperatives; the pressure to syn-
chronize biology and work led to the widely respected regular meal schedule. Then, too, the change from the simultaneous “French” to the sequential “Russian” food service streamlined workflow in the kitchen and at the table; it proved particularly tailored to consumption in restaurants, where seated clients expected individual menus and warm dishes. These conventions determined the forms (on menus) and the timing of meals in urban settings (but not in the countryside, where the seasons still determined both) at the end of the nineteenth century. They do not, however, reveal how actual eaters dealt with these norms or the content of their meals. In other words, the extent to which consumers ate by the “French model” and what this meant in quantitative terms remain unknown. The lack of knowledge especially concerns artisans and workers, the group whose social rhythms and eating practices were most likely to endure the pressure of the arising urban organization. This is the gap that research into workers’ lunch away from home is seeking to fill.

This article expands the anthropological notion of the “proper meal,” to wit, the grammar behind a repast’s composition and sequencing, to account for the quantitative aspects of workers’ lunch away from home in Paris around 1900. It reconstructs the caloric content of what Parisians described as a normal meal and shows that male workers had easier access than their female colleagues to what many in French society considered a full repast. Crucially, a full-fledged takeout food sector offered alternatives to the French model of a structured meal. The history of these street and carry-away foods has fallen into oblivion, enabling contemporary fast foods to be interpreted as foreign and labeled as junk food.

Eating out during the workday was “an ineluctable necessity for many workers” in Paris, “a hardworking” city of 2.7 million inhabitants “and many thousand workshops and factories” at the turn of the twentieth century. Its importance notwithstanding, the midday meal taken away from home has received only scant historical attention. John Burnett details the burden such lunches taken by men put on family budgets in England, and Kathleen Leonard Turner illustrates families’ strategies of food provisioning in North American cities. The supply

side is the focus of Jakob Tanner, Anne Lhuissier, and Abigail Carroll, who tie the emergence of industrial canteens—where Swiss, French, and American workers could find sustenance away from home—to economic pressure and sometimes to a philanthropic outlook, but mostly to bosses’ growing comprehension of the relation between workers’ rest and their productivity in the second half of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.8 While the importance of public drinking to workers’ sociability and their political activism is the theme of W. Scott Haine’s study of the Parisian café in the nineteenth century,9 eating out turns up as an element of the bourgeois drive for social distinction in Rebecca L. Spang’s and Rachel Rich’s narratives about the invention of the restaurant and its social uses as places to stage power and influence.10

These histories point to areas that need further research. For one, the physiological aspects of workers’ meals away from home require investigation, and insights into the meaning of eating one’s fill during the workday expand our knowledge of workers’ standard and quality of living. In other words, we learn about the social definition of metabolic “needs.” Then, too, we do well to remember that the difference between middle-class and working-class households hinged on women’s gainful employment, and in that respect married French women outpaced their counterparts in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States by a ratio of four to one at the beginning of the twentieth century (the fact did not escape contemporary observers).11 Both income and work created specific problems for working women. Helen Harden Chenut has depicted their struggle to keep family and work in sync as “an exhausting routine,”12 and Eliza Earle Ferguson has sketched out the tensions that existed between spouses over the distribution of household resources.13 Yet most of the history of women’s consumption

13 Eliza Earle Ferguson, Gender and Justice: Violence, Intimacy, and Community in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (Baltimore, MD, 2010), 57–60, 74–77.
concerns the private, middle-class household, rather than working-class families. The significant involvement of women in the French labor market meant that many among them lunched away from home, and gender offers a prism through which to analyze the experience of the midday meal among the working class.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the question of “whether people lunching out of the home—and we know that they are plenty—get their money’s worth with respect to their physical needs” had become a public preoccupation. By that time, organic chemistry had succeeded in measuring a foodstuff’s energy content, an achievement that made it possible to think of food as fuel. In the 1870s French agronomists put a price on the calories of fodder and, by substituting oats, corn, and legumes according to their cost per energy unit, reduced the expenses of feeding the enormous number of horses drawing carts and coaches in Paris by more than 30 percent. The publication of Wilbur O. Atwater’s “Pecuniary Economy of Food” in 1888 prompted the application of the same quantitative method to human consumption, and it put the calculation of “the relation of the nutritious value of food to its cost” on the public agenda on both sides of the Atlantic.

The idea found fertile ground in reform-minded France. Philanthropists and members of the academic establishment integrated it into the program of the Société Scientifique d’Hygiène Alimentaire et d’Alimentation Rationnelle (SSHA), founded in 1904 with financial support from the French state. The dean of the medical faculty, Louis Landouzy (1845–1917), a tuberculosis specialist, tireless promoter of improvements in public health, and frequent guest speaker at the SSHA, summed up the scientific rationale for making inquiries into popular food practices. “Human food,” he wrote in 1908, “is a simple question of must and have. The must is the responsibility of the physician; the have, of the economist.”


17 Louis Grandceau et al., Études expérimentales sur l’alimentation du cheval de trait (Paris, 1882).


was to assess popular diets in order to reform them. The newly gained nutritional knowledge specified the guidelines for turning putatively profligate workers into efficient and healthy consumers.\(^\text{20}\) Despite the moralizing impulse, it is precisely because investigators proceeded meticulously and aspired to produce incontrovertible data that the results of their studies provide many of the sources for the retrieval of workers’ lunch practices.

There is more to the recovery of past popular consumer behavior than the retrospective assessment of agency, degrees of liberty with respect to norms, and indigenous (as opposed to scientific) conceptions of proper meals. The historical study of lunchtime away from home, as a constrained practice and a source of physical energy, has contemporary relevance. France’s relative resistance to eating disorders has even been tied to the French model of meals.\(^\text{21}\) While there is a vast literature on the increase in the size of portions and meals consumed in commercial environments and their contribution to the incidence of obesity in the United States, England, and, to a lesser extent, continental Europe,\(^\text{22}\) smaller servings in restaurants seem to contribute to the lower rate of overweight in France.\(^\text{23}\) Evidence from 1900, when empirical analyses and quantification were being institutionalized, expands the temporal horizon of current research and offers figures for comparison across time as well as space.

This article begins with a description of the demand for lunch away from home and the supply it met. The inquiry then examines whether the anthropological notion of the “proper meal” is an appropriate tool to portray French working-class practices circa 1900. This is followed by recovering the conventional portion size to reconstruct the canonical meal’s calorie content and by comparing it to real consumption in Parisian working-class restaurants. Finally, I will argue that the infatuation with the so-called French model of meals creates a blind spot among present-day commentators on the street-food and carry-away sector, whose existence has allowed consumers to distance themselves from social norms, yesterday and today.


The Working-Class Demand for Lunch Away from Home

Three factors sustained the demand for lunch away from home: geography, women’s employment, and industrial time. The difference in rental charges pushed working families to the periphery and into the suburbs of Paris, whereas shops remained in its center.24 There was no way around the fact that “the great distance between work and home makes it impossible to have lunch with the family.”25 Portraits of artisans or lower-level employees—cabinetmakers, postmen, carpenters, ragmen, and dressmakers—mention the half-hour or hour walk to work (see fig. 1).26 In 1900 the Richmond (VA) Times saw something picturesque in the crowds of dressmakers and milliners walking in the day’s early hours from Montmartre, Batignolles, Clichy, and Belleville into the heart of the city,27 while the reform-minded editor of Demain considered it an argument in favor of efficient and affordable public transportation, a long-running—and ongoing—political fight.28

Proximity was a relative term, Alain Faure has shown, and even the very specific and circumscribed recruitment patterns in Parisian industries (the abattoirs at La Villette; the gasworks, sugar refineries, and metal fabricators in the nineteenth arrondissement; and the bijouteries and the Imprimerie Nationale in the third arrondissement) often meant that workers walked a great deal.29 The architects’ professional association traced eating out as a self-evident routine among carpenters to budgets dating from the July monarchy,30 and an 1851 parliamentary inquiry into the meat trade accorded so much importance to commercial meals that three restaurant owners were called to describe...
how their establishments served between 150 and 200 lunches per day to a working-class clientele. They probably represented the average eating place in central Paris, although they were overshadowed by “La Californie,” located on the Chaussée du Maine, where three thousand people from “the poorest working class” took meals served nonstop from eight in the morning to eleven at night.31 In the early 1880s phi-

31 Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), C//1014, Commission d’Enquête Relative à la Production et à la Consommation de la Viande, Apr. 12 and 24, 1851.
lanthropists and humanitarian activists believed that “the worker who lunches with his family is a veritable exception in Paris; the distances are set against it, and often the wife works, too, so she lacks the time, the desire, and even the capacity to manage the household.” The city’s demographic and industrial growth and the spread of its working population into the suburbs had made eating out one of its salient features. This was a reason that, for example, unions argued in favor of cooperative restaurants for workers in central Paris.

Women’s gainful employment was the second determinant of eating away from home. It, too, had a long history, and it gained in significance as job opportunities were added. The number of seamstresses stood at about ninety thousand in the mid-1890s, and Charles Benoist, who cites this figure, also lists a selection of thirty-five industrial occupations from food production (sugar refining, canning, chocolate) to pharmaceuticals and leather goods (bags as well as harnesses) that hired women. As one observer noted, there were “multiple industries where women [could] apply their skills.” This meant that ever more women were eating out. For families, this had a doubling effect: expenses for food increased more when both husband and wife ate out. “In most working households in Paris,” the *Journal du dimanche* reported in 1893, “the husband works, and so does the wife; they leave home at dawn, each one in a different direction, to go to the shop, the factory or the building site; one goes to Batignolles, the other to Grenelle, Montrouge or Ménilmontant, and they see each other again only in the evening.” At noon, both had lunch away from home.

Finally, the need for the close coordination of production tasks even trumped proximity. Industrial time tends to speed up the rhythm of work and induces the need for the synchronization of diverse tasks. Meal breaks and working cadences conflict, and indeed the time allotted to the lunch break became an issue between owners and workers. Strikes occurred to allow women to leave work early so as to prepare lunch for the family or to have owners install stoves to heat up food that workers had brought to the plant. In some cases, industrial

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33 Haine arrives at the same conclusion (*World*, 93–95).
working conditions led companies to offer meals on-site. The railway enterprise Compagnie d’Orléans sponsored a canteen for its workers where, already by the 1880s, eight hundred meals were served daily,\(^{40}\) and the chocolate factory Menier in Noisiel opened a dining hall to allow “homemakers whose job keeps them at the factory and who lack the necessary time to prepare suitable food, to have nevertheless access to hot, hygienic and affordable dishes.”\(^{41}\) The restaurant reserved for the unmarried women in the female workforce at the Maison de la Bonne Presse served “an excellent lunch (that includes some bread for the afternoon snack)” to its 220 typographic composers and other personnel involved in the usually hurried newspaper production process.\(^{42}\)

Distance to work, women’s employment, and industrial time determined working people’s demand for food away from home but did not determine the form that eating out really took. Monographs on blue-collar Parisians by the Le Play school of sociology and published in *Les ouvriers des deux mondes* (1857–1928) show that in eleven of seventeen households at least one member ate out during the workday. This is a small sample, to be sure, but one that shows the variety of arrangements for having lunch away from home: some did it daily, some once a week; some were regular customers of commercial establishments, and some carried their billycan or a basket to work where they may, or may not, have heated its contents (oftentimes the leftovers from the previous evening). Sometimes a family member brought a packed lunch to the eater. What emerges clearly, however, is the insignificance of wages as determinants of lunch away from home: just as today, revenues bear no relation to eating out (the coefficient of correlation is close to zero).\(^{43}\)

Demand is thus hard to quantify. The newspaper *La croix* speculated in 1912 that seamstresses alone accounted for one hundred thousand midday restaurant meals per day.\(^ {44}\) There is some circumstantial evidence concerning the proportion of working families relying on commercial foods at lunch. Among 296 workers’ households at the Vincennes cartridge factory (La Cartoucherie) investigated in June 1910, 189 (or 64 percent) returned home for lunch, 59 (about 20 percent) brought their gamelle to the refectory, and 43 (about 15 percent) relied


\(^{44}\) “Les restaurants féminins à Paris,” *La croix*, Sept. 27, 1912, 1.
on commercial meals in restaurants or the canteen. In 1901 a feather-making entrepreneur whose business employed 250 women affirmed that fewer than 50 (or 20 percent of his workforce) could afford to eat in restaurants, 150 (or 60 percent) brought their meals in baskets, and the remaining fifth lived in the neighborhood and thus could eat at home. A secondary analysis of a 1906 survey into savings behavior among the poor in the eastern, working-class arrondissements carried out by the Ligue contre la Misère shows that 301 households out of 725 (or 42 percent) spent money on meals away from home. A 1908 inquiry of New York working-class families arrived, coincidentally, at the same percentage of households incurring expenses for take-away or eat-out food. For Paris, no such precision is possible. But these data mean that one-fifth and possibly two-fifths of workers’ families had a member who regularly paid for lunch in a commercial or cooperative establishment. With almost a million workers in the city, this made for a lot of lunches.

The Supply of Working-Class Lunches Away from Home

Given the heavy demand, commercial restaurants were ubiquitous in Paris. “Restaurants abound in all popular neighborhoods, and even on the boulevards,” the Almanach illustré noted in 1908. By 1900 the city counted fifteen hundred restaurants, over two thousand cafés and brasseries, and at least nine thousand marchands de vin. The literary journalist Émile Goudeau (1849–1906) captured the ambiance—and the possibility to get a bite to eat throughout the day—when he provided the rich nomenclature required to sketch the portrait of these “temples of consumption that we call restaurants, breweries, wine joints, cafés, dégustations, distilleries, greasy spoons, holes-in-the-wall, debits: everything for the service of the belly. There are streets in Paris where ninety out of a hundred businesses relate to food and drink.” The profusion of eating places made for a very competitive scene, and it

51 Émile Goudeau, Paris qui consomme (Paris, 1895), v.
was conventional wisdom that many—one official put the share at two-thirds—of the smaller eating places were up for sale because profits were small and survival precarious.52

The multiplicity of food and catering businesses should not hide the reality of a segmented market. Naturally, price limited access to restaurants, and a 1908 report distinguished between cheap dives and palaces whose clienteles never sat next to each other.53 Such segregation was nothing new, of course. The Paris World Fairs of 1889 and 1900 confirmed and solidified a tripartite division. Concessions concerned “luxurious restaurants, comparable to the best establishments in Paris,” middlebrow “fixed-price restaurants of a more modest character,” and popular restaurants whose menus were affordable, respectable, but (during exhibitions at least) by no means cheap.54 As a rule of thumb, this three-tiered economic breakdown helped navigate the large number of eating places in Paris. Tourist guides usually offered it as a mental map to the alimentary topography of a city where eating “is considered a fine art.”55 Yet a careful eye could distinguish how even working-class customers sorted themselves when eating away from home. Retail employees patronized the prix fixe restaurants, their less-esteemed colleagues from wholesale businesses would sit apart in a particular room set aside at the marchand de vin-restaurateur, while artisans and workers patronized the gargotes and other bistros, some of which served only beverages to accompany the meals brought in.56

In addition to purchasing power, gender influenced the restaurant business. Of course, women and men rubbed elbows in many places where the working class went for lunch. But contemporary observers tended to assign a rather male clientele to the so-called mastroquets (Parisian slang for marchands de vins who also served food).57 In contrast, the newcomer among commercial eating places, the crèmerie—“a modern establishment . . . somewhere between the restaurant and the café” according to Pierre Larousse’s Grand Dictionnaire—catered

52 About one-quarter of the 1,574 bankruptcies in 1896 concerned food and beverage retailers. See Archives de la Préfecture de Police, BA 505, Situation industrielle 1896–97.
53 “A quel prix voulez-vous déjeuner?” 39–44.
57 “Ce que mangent les pauvres gens,” 2; “Devant le Zinc,” La lanterne, Dec. 3, 1907, 3.
mostly to women. Its rise in the fierce world of eateries had profited, says Larousse, from the extension of its menu. It had started out with simple cups of coffee with cream (or milk), added scrambled and fried eggs, and from there expanded into grilled meat. Their menu boards did not carry strong liquor, and even wine did not appear in every one, a major distinction with respect to the mastroquet.

The way gender shaped the perception of consumer habits appears in efforts to reform them. Temperance restaurants clearly targeted men. Women posed a different problem. For most philanthropists, the wife as homemaker and the family meal were the norm, while working outside the home should have remained the exception. “The wife’s absence from the home is a deplorable fact,” noted Le Figaro in 1906. However, the demand for women’s labor was pressing in Paris, and so was the need for supplementary income in many families. To send women back into their homes would have been a lost cause to reformers, who consequently aimed at improving conditions surrounding work. Lunch and freedom from supervision (and hence the temptation to succumb to vice) went hand in hand, and this was a predicament that mostly Catholic activists—“pious ladies,” noted the reporter of the Washington, DC, Evening Star—meant to tackle. Their goal was to provide meals and morality. The first two restaurants féminins opened in 1893, and although they were not self-supporting at first, their example inspired the subsequent creation of at least three dozen similar establishments by 1912. These few restaurants did not weigh heavily in the production of commercial meals in Paris, and yet, wrote the Annales politiques et littéraires in 1908, “it would be impossible to count the number of female teachers, state and bank employees, professors of music and languages; students of the Fine and Decorative Arts at the Sorbonne; saleswomen, cashiers, stenographers, typists and seamstresses who came [to the restaurant féminin de la Rive gauche] to have a healthy, comforting meal and get a little bit of encouragement.”


59 “Crèmerie,” 486.

60 “Un restaurant de tempérance,” Journal des débats, Aug. 13, 1899, 1.


63 “Chronique,” La semaine des familles, Jan. 14, 1893, 669–70; “Pour soixante-quinze centimes,” Le Gaulois, Jan. 15, 1894, 1; “Restaurants de dames seules,” Le Figaro, May 13, 1894, 2; “Courrier de la semaine,” Le petit Parisien, supplément littéraire, Oct. 7, 1894, 322; “Restaurants—Homes pour dames et jeunes filles,” La femme (1911–12). (This information appears on the second-to-last, unnumbered page of every installment of La femme at that time.)

transform the labor market and to reinstate the home as women’s natural sphere of activity, the promoters of ladies’ restaurants endeavored to alleviate the real cost of, and remove putative moral perils inherent in, commercial midday meals taken amid a mixed public.

The variety of eating places and the representation of their clientele notwithstanding, menus espoused, with the one exception of the crèmeries, the same form. The sequence of propositions was couched in the categories of appetizer, meat dish with vegetables, and dessert. Bread and wine were almost incontrovertible accompaniments to the meal.65 This standard structure had come into its own only recently, at least in eating places patronized by the working class.

As late as the 1860s, artisans in the building trades lunched around eleven a.m. on “the ordinaire,” a piece of beef in a somewhat vegetable-augmented bouillon, part of which they ate cold as a sandwich at two p.m. (“le coup de deux heures”).66 The down-and-out heroine of La porteuse de pain, an enormous melodramatic success in print and onstage in the 1880s (and in film and even on television later), spent her piteous small change on a last lunch consisting of an “ordinaire” (from then on, things looked up for her).67 Gastronomer Eugène-Victor Briffaut thought it still the defining aspect of a Parisian lunch in the July monarchy, and, according to the Petit Journal of 1869, it constituted “the most indispensable element of public [i.e., popular restaurant] food.”68 It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that separately prepared vegetables garnished the meat of the “ordinaire” and helped reduce the role of the bouillon.69 The American traveler Lee Meriwether, unaccustomed to French ways in the mid-1880s, came to know this new configuration of lunch with the help of the working-class clients in a popular bouillon. His meal duly consisted of three parts: soup, a dish of meat accompanied by potatoes, and plums for dessert.70 Meriwether had gone native, so to speak, and by doing so he discovered what it meant to have a “proper meal” in Paris around 1900.

65 “Ce que mangent les pauvres gens,” 2; “A quel prix voulez-vous déjeuner?,” 41–43.
67 The pivotal scene is highlighted in “Premières représentations,” Le Figaro, Jan. 12, 1889, 2; for a later edition of the novel first serialized in Le petit journal, see Xavier de Montépin, La porteuse de pain (Paris, 1903–5), 374–75.
69 See the account by a working-class representative in Paris: Conseil Municipal, Bulletin officiel, Dec. 9, 1885, 694.
70 Lee Meriwether, A Tramp Trip; or, How to See Europe on Fifty Cents a Day (New York, 1887), 252.
Quantitative Criteria: The “Strictly Necessary” and the “Proper Meal”

Anthropologists use the notion of the “proper meal” to pinpoint the rules that determine the association of dishes, their sequencing, and so on.\footnote{Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” Daedalus 101, no. 1 (1972): 61–81.} This definition derives from private, sit-down meals in families and highlights the sexual division of labor. Meriwether’s encounter with French food culture suggests its parallel (and maybe prior) public existence. But the structural makeup of a meal does not exhaust its meaning, and the commercial context may yet accentuate a quantitative expectation. After all, a meal taken during the workday ought to satiate a customer’s hunger. Historians have paid attention to provisioning in collective households (hospitals, prisons, armies, and navies) to gauge empirical definitions of what amount of food it takes to survive, work, and fight.\footnote{For a recent example that compares official ration scales and actual incapacity to live up to them, see Rachel Duffett, The Stomach for Fighting: Food and the Soldiers of the Great War (Manchester, 2012); and Robert Mandrou, “Le ravitaillement d’une ville dans la Ville: La ration alimentaire de restauration à l’Assistance publique de Paris (1820–1870),” Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik 179, no. 3 (1966): 189–99.} Budgets have helped re-create private consumption patterns in single households. Meals away from home and their contribution to an individual’s metabolism have, however, so far eluded historical analysis.\footnote{Ulrike Thoms, who lists the sizes of portions served in the canteen at the Krupp Iron Works in Essen, Germany, between 1901 and 1910 is silent on the method of calculation but gives the impression that she simply divided provisioned quantities by the number of meals, without paying attention to the frequency with which dishes were served. See Thoms, “Industrial Canteens in Germany, 1850–1950,” in Eating Out in Europe, ed. Marc Jacobs and Peter Scholliers (Oxford, 2003), 362.} French sources allow them to receive a closer look, especially as there was a consensus on the meaning of the complete lunch. When the professor of medicine Louis Landouzy and his collaborators inquired into popular food habits in 1905, they noted that “they looked, of course, at the usual food that conforms to the taste of the greatest number, such as that found at the 
\textit{marchand de vins-restaurateur} where most of the workers usually take at least one of their daily meals.”\footnote{Louis Landouzy, Henri Labbé, and Marcel Labbé, \textit{Enquête sur l’alimentation d’une centaine d’ouvriers et d’employés parisiens. Ce qu’elle est: irraisonnée, insuffisante, insalubre, dispendieuse; ce qu’elle pourrait être: rationnelle, suffisante, salubre, économique} (Paris, 1905), 16.} The physiologist Jean Laumonier declared that the success of popular restaurants depended on portions “calculated to respond to the expectations of adult workers.”\footnote{Jean Laumonier, “Bouillons ouvriers et restaurants populaires,” Bulletin général de thérapeutique, no. 141 (1901): 287, 291.} It is to the retrieval of their quantitative aspect that we turn now.

A condition for the assessment of meals’ caloric content around 1900 is the retrieval of portion size. The rise of nutritional science...
in the nineteenth century promoted the identification of foodstuffs by calorie. The diligent agricultural engineer J. Tribot, a member of the Brussels-based Institut Solvay who worked at the Laboratoire de Physiologie des Sensations at the Sorbonne, compiled a list of portion weights and their corresponding energy content between 1905 and 1907 when he carried out an analysis of more than 130 meals in Parisian working-class restaurants. The enumeration comprised nine appetizers, twenty-four entrées (meat and eggs, but no fish), thirteen side dishes (legumes, pasta, vegetables), and ten desserts (six kinds of cheese, a cake, three kinds of fruit). These empirical numbers correspond quite closely to the estimated helpings served in Duval’s restaurants during the World Fair in 1889, when it supplied more than 2.4 million meals (or around forty-three thousand per day). A comparison with the recommendations provided by a pre–World War I self-help manual to “compose salutary meals” concurs with Tribot’s figures. Menus suggested by one of the first domestic science handbooks to evaluate servings in calories, whose aim was to provide information on adequate meals at the least expense, no doubt diverged from the firsthand evidence, which merely shows that campaigns to educate consumers had a long way to go against habit. Overall, however, these data suggest the pervasiveness of a cultural definition of portion size. Laumonier brought the point home when summing up his practical research into menus at Parisian working-class restaurants: “In the bouillons of Paris . . . the portion of meat weighs, according to its nature, between 100 and 150 grams, vegetables [and legumes] between 250 and 300 grams. But note that the French worker, and surely the Parisian worker, is not satisfied with a single plate; he often adds either a bowl of soup, a piece of cheese or some other dessert.” Once Laumonier factored in 250 to 300 grams of bread, the weight of the standard lunch—soup, meat and vegetables, cheese, bread, and dessert—climbed to at least 800 and often 900 grams. It is this quantitative convention that authorizes the use of menu compositions to calculate a meal’s energy value.

The historical reconstruction of the “proper meal” in 1900 can now proceed with indications drawn from restaurant menus. Yet public

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77 “Courrier de l’Exposition,” L’univers illustré, Nov. 30, 1889, 762; supplies divided by number of served meals.


discussion in France on the standard of living (especially when applied to the weak, the elderly, and working families) centered on the notion of the strict nécessaire, that is, the biological and social minimum it took to survive. In an 1897 article titled “L’argent des pauvres,” Le matin wondered whether “any Parisian lacked the bare necessities.” The question inevitably involved food consumption, which took up 60 percent of the typical working-class family’s budget and was by far the most important item. The debate revolved around managing the resources of modest households, “to join the two ends, to keep out of difficulties [se tirer d’affaires] as the saying goes, without cutting into the strictly necessary, especially with respect to food.” A social investigator on the conditions of female workers in Paris considered that many among them had “reduced their needs to the strict nécessaire.”

Attention to collective representations can supplement the anthropological approach to commensality with its single reference point of the proper cultural standard. French society appreciated the full-blown incarnation of the meal but also envisioned a lower bound defined by the benchmark of provisioning at the “strictly necessary” level. While physiologists, too, searched for the discrete quantities of energy provisioning to maintain the basal metabolism or to fuel hard work, the “strictly necessary” and the “proper meal” constituted meaningful—and practical—categories of everyday life and, as such, helped organize such an ordinary habit as eating lunch.

Prolonged hardship and dire straits uncover the value of the strictly necessary amount of calories at lunch to get through the day. In 1899 a philanthropic refectory in the wealthy sixteenth arrondissement provided workers with half a pound of bread, a ragout, and a quarter liter of wine, which amounted to somewhere between 900 and 950 kcal. When Le matin asked “at what price it was possible to eat” in Paris, the least expensive (la façon la plus économique) provided 900 kcal. Landouzy’s menu plan for retired working men delivered between 900 and 950 kcal at the day’s most important meal. The medical opinion of Albert Dejouany considered a midday meal of less than 1,000 kcal

84 Mme. Froment, Ouvrières parisiennes (Lille, 1903), 3.
85 “L’assistance par le travail,” Le petit Parisien, June 12, 1899, 1.
86 “Pour quel prix peut-on se nourrir?,” Le matin, Feb. 12, 1906, 2.

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“quantitatively and qualitatively insufficient for a worker of average weight and constitution.”

For women, the smallest complete lunch contained bread, cheese, and vegetables, whose energy value was 740 kcal, and when Augusta Moll-Weiss assessed available repasts for women workers, she considered the soup kitchen’s portion of split peas and lard with bread at 753 kcal a decent, if minimal, meal.

Evidence culled from eyewitness accounts provides a first step toward determining the “proper meal.” In the 1880s and 1890s the seamstress and future union organizer Jeanne Bouvier (1865–1964) typically lunched on the “ordinaire,” plus bread, cheese, and wine. This meal, whose price remained below the expense incurred “by the best paid working women” (who probably added an hors d’oeuvre), contained 1,200 kcal. Bouvier’s choice was driven by pride, as she did not want to lose face in front of her colleagues. And self-respect was costly at 1.20 francs per lunch (a seamstress’s daily wages amounted to about 2.50 francs). The outlay left practically no room for indulgence at breakfast and dinner. Bouvier notes that she saved part of the beef from lunch for the evening, when she ate it with half a pound of bread bought at ten centimes. Her “proper” lunch amounted thus to about 1,000 kcal.

Men’s proper lunch included soup, bread, a meat dish, vegetables, and wine. Its caloric value rose to 1,300 kcal. The chronicle by the journalist Henry Leyret (1864–1944), who led an early experiment in participant observation by running a “troquet” in Belleville, breathes life into the anthropological abstraction: “The faubourien, in a pronounced natural concern for his health, takes care of himself, seeks a good cuisine, eating if he can meat at each meal; the common menu goes something like this: at eleven o’clock or noon, a soup, beef or the meat dish of the day, a vegetable, a piece of cheese, a pint of wine, and a small coffee—all for thirty sous [1 franc 50]; in the evening, half of this has to suffice.” While Leyret’s computation of the meal’s price seems high (average daily wages for artisans amounted to five or six francs), its composition corresponded to the widely shared convention. When discussing why he had authorized the workers’ canteen on the building site of the Exposition in 1900, Henry Boucher, minister of commerce, industry, post, and telegraphs, declared that “a normal meal, composed of an ordinaire, a portion of vegetables, a piece of cheese,
and the traditional cup of coffee, with half a liter of wine” at 1 franc 60 or 1 franc 70 was beyond the reach of construction workers. An assemblyman zeroed in on 0.85 to 1.05 francs that workers could and would pay for lunch,94 and that was congruent with the sum of 0.80 to 1.00 franc the Cooks’ Union of Paris provided for its unemployed members as a restaurant ticket for lunch in 1912.95

The fact of the collective representation of a “proper meal” is not in doubt. The depictions of what modest Parisians could obtain as lunch in public eateries conveyed a common understanding of its qualitative profile and quantitative makeup, which differed for men and women. Women’s menus offered 850–1,050 kcal and ranged from sixty to ninety-five centimes. Men’s menus offered 1,250 to 1,600 kcal and ranged from sixty centimes to a franc and a half. For both men and women, the cost of a meal did not correlate directly to the amount of food it contained.96 So much for the possibilities, but what about the plates of real consumers?

A Full Plate?

Eating out was an item on the agenda of the SSHA. Its journal published the results of Tribot’s quantitative investigations into workers’ lunch at three kinds of establishments: crèmeries, restaurants à prix fixe, and bouillons. At the crèmeries in the center of Paris, he analyzed ninety meals, assuring his readers that “all the figures correspond to the real value of meals consumed by a very great number of people, in general small employees and above all the small hands in the fashion and clothing business whose salary barely amounts to twenty francs per week and who it is absolutely necessary to instruct on the physiological value of their diet.”97 He examined forty meals taken by artisans at the restaurants à prix fixe, at which the client chooses a dish among a small list of possibilities for each course, as the overall price is set in advance. Tribot picked lunches that cost either 1.15 or 1.25 francs.98 Finally, he

94 Journal officiel de la République française: Débats parlementaires; Chambre des députés, séance du 5 févr. 1898, 435–36.
weighed the dishes at the popular bouillons, the model of which were the Bouillons Duval, “a Parisian institution,” according to the San Francisco Call, “and a striking feature of metropolitan life,” with over forty restaurants feeding forty thousand people daily in 1896. Duval’s trademark was the card on which uniformed waitresses inscribed consumed items, which thus enabled the client to adjust appetite and pocketbook. Tribot targeted lunches between 1.00 and 1.25 francs.

Tribot’s studies were well received. Empirical, their originality trumped laboratory experiments that often appeared theoretical and were too remote from the everyday experience of real eaters. Nutritional science had almost come into its own by 1900, but certain tools were still being refined. Atwater coefficients—the calorie content of macronutrients (1 g carbs = 4 kcals, etc.)—required stabilization. Tribot’s computations of energy value sometimes overlooked the difference between raw and cooked food, and they may, in general, slightly overestimate the caloric contribution of other foods. It is therefore necessary to verify Tribot’s calculations. From a synchronic point of view, they are set against the nutritional nomenclatures elaborated by chemist Jules Alquier at the beginning of the twentieth century. Today’s Répertoire général des aliments provides a diachronic checkpoint, although it is necessary to keep in mind that both foods and tastes for foods have changed (e.g., the appreciation of fatty meat has declined). Tribot’s weighings remain the basis of the estimation of the meals’ calories, but recalculation shows that he overestimated their energy content—especially when the servings included pasta and legumes. (Table 1 provides Tribot’s figures, as well as estimations based on current conversion coefficients.)

If the question was “to speak about money to the consumer,” as Alquier stressed, it was clear that Parisians of modest means received the best value at the restaurants à prix fixe, as long as they did not have access to canteens—or did not want to patronize them because, as it was said about the employees of the grands magasins, they preferred the “free air of the street” to the confining atmosphere in the refectory.

If, at the high caloric end, customers may have carried away part of the

102 See Jean-Claude Favier et al., Répertoire général des aliments: Table de composition, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1995), xxi–xxviii, for the development of analytic methods.
104 Montorgueil, Minutes parisiennes, 31–32.
### Table 1  
Energy value of commercial lunch in Paris ca. 1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Tribot (kcal)</th>
<th>Estimate (kcal)a</th>
<th>Price (frs)</th>
<th>Price/1,000 kcal (frs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cantine Menierb</td>
<td>2,096</td>
<td>1,764 872</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prix fixe 1</td>
<td>2,845</td>
<td>2,318 1,328</td>
<td>1.15–1.25</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prix fixe 2</td>
<td>2,083</td>
<td>1,865 1,171</td>
<td>1.15–1.25</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 individual mealsc</td>
<td>1,685</td>
<td>1,516 623</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouillon 2</td>
<td>1,914</td>
<td>1,343 657</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouillon 1</td>
<td>1,316</td>
<td>1,320 626</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crèmerie 2</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>746 244</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crèmerie 1</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>669 204</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crèmerie 3</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>538 252</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


aMy computation with current Atwater coefficients and correcting for Tribot’s oversights.

bValue provided in "Le restaurant."

cThis is Tribot’s composite control group; researched in 1906, the results were published in 1907, basic data augmented by 200 grams of bread and 0.25 liter of wine (9 percent alcohol), as suggested by observations reported in Labbé, “Le budget alimentaire,” 316 (see n. 4).
complimentary pound of bread (or 1,200 kcal) to constitute the basis of the afternoon snack, Tribot’s findings based on a sizable data set were not out of line with the conclusion reached by René Martial; his monograph of a hatter’s consumption pattern described a common, if more expensive, lunch providing between 1,500 and 1,600 kcal. 105 The second point concerns the rift between the crèmeries and the rest of the commercial eating places. Not only were meals in crèmeries below the standard of the “strictly necessary” for men and (in two cases) for women, but the cost per calorie was much higher than elsewhere.

This brings us back to the clientele. The purpose of the crèmeries was to serve a majority of women, yet their menus were not particularly close to what workers understood as “bien manger.” If economic considerations exerted no influence on this choice, what advantages did the female customers find at the crèmerie: camaraderie, informality, swift service, a short escape from the atelier? It was a choice that preoccupied ironic commentators such as Georges Montorgueil (“the meals of female workers are often only simulacra”), 106 raised concerns among distant observers (an early description mentioned women’s willingness to cheat their stomachs), 107 and infuriated reformers like Augusta Moll-Weiss who considered the insufficient food consumption among working women a moral outrage. 108

Time may well be an explanatory factor, since it was a scarce resource among the Parisian working class. 109 The myth notwithstanding, 110 all Paris did not take an hour for lunch. Women tended to eat more quickly than men—barely a quarter of an hour in the feather-making business, where the workforce was almost exclusively female, 111 and one and a half hours in the case of cabinetmakers, an exclusively male occupation. 112 This phenomenon was not purely Parisian. An investigation of the Bordeaux working class came to the same conclusion: “Whereas men take all the time to lunch [between 25 and 90 minutes], working women, for diverse reasons, spend hardly a quarter of an hour and at most twenty minutes on their midday meal.” 113 Crèmeries most obviously

106 Montorgueil, Minutes parisiennes, 75–76.
109 “Hygiène,” La revue, June 1, 1907, 402.
113 Meyer Adda, Alimentation et tuberculose (Bordeaux, 1908), 35–37.
allowed their clientele to move outside of the French meal canon and to grab a quick bite to eat. They offered an alternative to the French model and so formed a bridge to other modes of eating out during the workday.

Alternatives to the French Model

Alternatives to restaurant eating surely combined economic and social considerations. There are examples of fathers bringing meat to the restaurant to reduce the expense for lunch.\textsuperscript{114} The savings were greatest when workers carried all their food in a basket or in a container so as to reheat it in the shop, a customary practice among female garment workers in Paris.\textsuperscript{115} At the Crédit Foncier employees used a refectory with a gas stove to warm up their repast.\textsuperscript{116} Wives brought lunch pails to the building site or the atelier.\textsuperscript{117} Others profited from the supply of carry-away portions. In fact, many a publicity flier for restaurants catering to a working-class clientele—the Restaurant Populaire near the city hall in the first arrondissement, as well as the Grande Pension Ouvrière on the Rue de Flandre near La Villette (fig. 2) and the Grand Restaurant Ouvrier on Rue d’Alésia in the fourteenth arrondissement—carried the line “Cuisine à emporter” or “Vente à emporter.”\textsuperscript{118}

Age influenced the form these diverse practices took. Younger workers appeared to rely on takeout foods. Some among them simply ate cold cuts and reserved warm food for dinner. Sandwiches composed of a hundred and forty grams of bread and forty grams of charcuterie provided an overall energy value of less than 500 kcal.\textsuperscript{119} Combinations varied. Unmarried seamstresses brought cold meats or cheese from home, fetched fried potatoes in the street or bread at the nearest bakery, and finished their lunch hour with a “petit noir [small cup of coffee].”\textsuperscript{120} They took advantage of “the public benches in our parks at

\begin{footnotes}
\item Du Maroussem, “Ebeniste,” 65, 79.
\itemLes coulisses d’un emprunt,” \textit{Le Figaro}, Oct. 6, 1879, 1.
\item Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Collection des Ephémères, Cartes et menus de restaurants.
\item Jean Lahor and Lucien Graux, \textit{L’alimentation à bon marché saine et rationnelle} (Paris, 1908), 31.
\end{footnotes}
Figure 2  Eat in or carry away: menu from a working-class restaurant near La Villette, ca. 1900. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Collections des Ephémères
noon.”\textsuperscript{121} in the Tuileries (to the great annoyance of the park administration, which needed to employ three caretakers to collect the greasy papers in which food had been wrapped)\textsuperscript{122} or were “lunching on a small bag of fries leaning against the wall of the post office where the sun shines.”\textsuperscript{123} The Catholic-leaning social critic Lucien de Vissec described the “hubbub [\textit{tohu-bohu}]” on the streets, the lines in front of the \textit{cr\`emeries}, the bakeries, the charcutiers, and the stalls sporting signs such as “cuisine à emporter—portions à 30, 40 et 50 centimes,” and the bars where working-class girls “gulp down” their pittance with a glass of white wine and a coffee. De Vissec expressed concern for these “poor stomachs.”\textsuperscript{124}

To American observers, there was a romantic element to the splendid misery of French working girls.\textsuperscript{125} But at the opposing Catholic and socialist ends of the political spectrum, eating in the open air had less to do with choice and romanticism than with inadequate revenues that induced the obligation to consume food “on a bench, in the street, in the Tuileries or the Champs Elysées, or if permitted, in a corner of the shop.”\textsuperscript{126} If workers ate “unhealthy food in an unhealthy environment,”\textsuperscript{127} that called for reform. The Paris municipality supported efforts to provide refectories to women who worked in the artesan district between the Place Vendôme and the Arts et Métiers.\textsuperscript{128}

Fast food was a normal feature of Parisian life around 1900 because, as left-leaning reporters Léon Bonneff and Maurice Bonneff put it, lunch was a luxury affordable only to those who could pay ninety centimes or a franc.\textsuperscript{129} A whole street-food sector existed—from oyster stalls to fried tripe merchants. One very common dish was soup (the vendor provided the bowl), and the fried potato was a working-class indulgence (“main course and treat,” Montorgueil noted).\textsuperscript{130} Some hygienists may have frowned upon such foods, but others commended butchers and caterers who supplied soup and meat that workers could carry away during “the short time allotted to lunch.”\textsuperscript{131} The presence

\textsuperscript{122} “Les vandales du Louvre,” \textit{La presse}, Sept. 18, 1903, 3.
\textsuperscript{123} “Le meeting de la place de la Bourse,” \textit{Le petit Parisien}, Dec. 9, 1883, 2.
\textsuperscript{124} André Vernières [Lucien de Vissec], \textit{Camille Frison: Ouvrière de la couture} (Paris, 1908), 38–39.
\textsuperscript{125} “Lunch Hour,” 22–23. “Many of these girls eat their lunch box in the Tuileries Gardens,” noted an article on the quixotic and romantic superstitions among the midinettes: see “Signs and Omens of the Paris Midinettes,” \textit{Sun} (New York), Sept. 28, 1913, 10.
\textsuperscript{126} “Les restaurants féminins,” 1.
\textsuperscript{127} “Pour les midinettes,” \textit{L’humanité}, May 29, 1905, 2.
\textsuperscript{129} Léon Bonneff and Maurice Bonneff, \textit{La classe ouvrière} (Paris, 1911), 97.
\textsuperscript{130} Montorgueil, \textit{Minutes parisiennes}, 55.
of street sellers of prepared foods increasingly posed problems to the police, but an 1894 assessment of the situation noted “the growing fondness of the consumers for sales in the open air.”

The *Journal du dimanche* described these “friandises parisiennes à bon marché”: “In our era of so many hurried, busy and rushed people, it is possible to eat a lunch worthy of Lucullus, while walking, without losing time and cheaply, to boot.” This was an opinion that the correspondent of the *Washington, DC, Evening Star* shared: “The black pudding [*boudins*], sausages and fried potatoes are peculiar specialties of the Parisian street. In alleyways and doorways the concern is set up regularly by a motherly old woman glad to make a moderate day’s wage for her profit, and ‘two sous of fried potatoes’ make the most famous of all hunger stoppers.”

An economy of food expedience offered provisions to workers and their families who avoided—or could not spare the money or time to patronize—restaurants with menus structured according to the French model. Note that an observer of the cooperative restaurant for female postal employees considered lunch at seventy-five and eighty centimes “maybe a bit high, though the meal is excellent,” whereas the five female workers at a small lace-paper firm argued in favor of bringing in their food baskets because they “could not spend twenty sous [or one franc] for lunch.”

L’abbé Georges Mény offered the reformers’ point of view. He held in 1910 that it was not possible “to pass in front of these cooked-food merchants [*marchands de mets cuits*], often installed in the narrow corridor of a more or less unwelcoming building, without getting sick. It’s there that working-class women [who work at home] go to grab their victuals at ninety cents per day.” While Mény meant to show the need to improve and possibly outlaw such practices, he also made clear that every aspect seemed measured when it came to carry-away dishes: time, money, quality, and, one supposes, quantity.

Takeout, carry-away, *crèmeries*: all these forms of getting lunch during the workday were very different from the canonical French meal. But the single dish, perhaps a carryover from earlier times when the *ragoût* dominated working-class lunch, was served even in places where

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135 “Pour les petites ouvrières,” *Le XIXe siècle*, Sept. 11, 1902, 1.
136 AN, F/22/474, folder 4, Dossier d’un projet de modification des art. 5, 6, 8 et 9 du décret du 10 mars 1894, Ouvrières de la Maison Blouin à Monsieur le Ministre, Oct. 4, 1901.
the standard menu card was presented. The “restaurant féminin de la rive gauche” had a by then typical carte with a tripartite arrangement (hors d’oeuvres, meat and vegetables, dessert), but, so a commentary went, “many clients do not allow themselves to indulge in such follies. They keep to their single dish, accompanied by a sous de pain, and spend all in all thirteen sous [sixty-five centimes].”138 The Union chrétienne des ateliers de femmes divided its clientele into three categories: the very poor, who spent fifteen centimes per meal on a portion of bread and cheese; the poor, who spent sixty centimes for a lunch consisting of two vegetable or legume dishes accompanied by bread and wine; and the rich, whose eighty-centime meals included all three courses (i.e., meat too).139 The customer at the bouillon populaire, “recruiting their clientele among workers,”140 could compose meals to suit their taste and pocketbook. The keystone was l’addition, the note on which each consumed dish and its price were added upon its serving, the sum of which was collected at the cash register when exiting the establishment (just as in the American diner). The fact that “you may retire after partaking of only a plate of soup as unnoticed as if you had patronized half the menu” was—according to an American reporter—a distinct advantage of the bouillons,141 one that Le temps deemed a convenient means to apportion expenses according to the content of one’s purse.142 The French model functioned as a reference, but it constrained neither the composition of the meal nor its order.

Conclusion: What Is the Reach of a Model?

The nature of the trade, the distance to work, and timing were the three elements that determined the decision of workers to eat a commercial lunch away from home around 1900. Income did not prompt the routine. The phenomenon touched about one-third of the Parisian working class and reveals a rift between the consumption patterns of women and men. While male workers and employees found a supply that answered the cultural definition of the proper meal in its qualitative as well as in the hitherto unexplored quantitative aspects, their female colleagues confronted a situation at odds with the French

139 Georges Risler, “Restaurants, hôtels et pensions de famille,” La réforme sociale, 7th ser., no. 3 (1912): 257.
142 “Fagots,” Le temps, Apr. 14, 1899, 2; see also Huit jours à Paris: Septembre 1875 (Orléans, 1875), 108.
model. Incidentally, Giacomo Puccini transformed the young working women’s dire condition into *La Bohème*, which premièred in 1896; its protagonist, Mimi—Mimi Pinson being the popular representation of a young, unmarried female wage earner, also known as *midinette* because she hurries through lunch on a summary repast—dies of poverty-induced tuberculosis; the second act stages facets of the street-food business in Paris (set, it must be said, about 1840). There lies a point to ponder: next to the orderly restaurant business that thrived on lunch and dinner and three courses per meal, a more informal ready-to-go food sector made it possible for a great many consumers to circumvent a norm of quite recent origin. Their point of reference may well have been the “strict nécessaire.” Jean-Paul Aron sketched the existence of a secondary food market in which leftovers from the legitimate restaurant industry supplied street vendors, yet historians of the nineteenth century have preferred to describe the most exalted features of French cuisine rather than explore its less lofty aspects. In any case, the French model was not the norm, especially for the working class.

Attention to the cultural importance and the material content of the commercial midday meal around 1900 thus has implications for today. The results offer a starting point to examine the developments of food practices and body weights in the twentieth century. A transatlantic comparison raises questions. In the late 1870s Mark Twain famously observed middle-class American tourists who found that meals in Paris would have been improved by the addition of a large, American-style roast of beef or mutton. Even so, American travelers spending 1.50 francs usually got “what the Americans would call a square meal of the ordinary kind.” In 1901 a *Washington (DC) Times* correspondent recommended a *restaurant à prix fixe* on Rue Turbigo where the *déjeuner* “is 1.25 francs, about 25 cents, and while the variety is not great, the cooking is good and the portions quite generous.” Such a proper meal, we now know, provided somewhere around 1,500 kcal. The Parisian data shine light on the reason that the members of the so-called diet squad, New York police rookies participating in an experiment of eating a number of calories scientifically determined to make for complete nourishment in January 1917, complained about their 1,000-kcal
lunches (dinners were on average somewhat larger). The scientific diet obviously fell short of the square meal. There is a need for further research here, too, but it is possible to broach the hypothesis that the American and French ideas of a full commercial midday meal may not have differed that much at the turn of the century (breakfast was altogether different, as its continental and American forms did not share much beyond the label). The similarity matters because energy values of commercial midday meals had diverged significantly in the long run. By the 1980s French women consumed 737 kcal at lunch away from home during work days, men 1,069, a value that further declined to 583 kcal for women and 846 for men in 2006. In the United States research into popular full-service restaurant meals in Boston puts the current average at 1,327 kcal. Social scientists thus confront a puzzle. They need to explain the practices of food away from home in France and the United States, where developments in the twentieth century almost look like mirror images. On the one hand, there is the persistence of the average lunch’s energy content in the United States during the growth of fast-food chains. On the other, there is the reduction of calories per average lunch in France, where the canonical model of the three-course meal asserted its hold to the point of removing the street-food and carry-away trade from the purview of academic research. Yet these calories weigh in on the scales of the people who consume them.