Culture depends on cookery. For myself, the only immortality I desire is to invent a new sauce.
—Oscar Wilde, Vera, or the Nihilists (1883)

Is French cuisine an invention? Does it make sense, where cooking is concerned, to think in terms of either the originality or the singularity that invention presupposes? What could any cook possibly “invent” to earn the epithet “King of Chefs,” as Carême was called? Indeed, for contemporaries, his surname alone sufficed to identify the man and his art. The king authorized the signature “Carême de Paris.” To be sure, Carême forcefully defended his cooking as new, modern, and superior. Still, virtually every publishing chef from the seventeenth century on made similar claims. Yet another defense and illustration of French cuisine hardly explains Carême’s ascendency.

Carême belongs in a class of his own, not just because he was a great chef—others could claim as much—but because he was an extraordinarily gifted cultural entrepreneur. He was the first culinary modern, a star whose celebrity extended beyond the kitchen into the culture at large. Because Carême understood that modern society favored the many, not the few, he realized that even the most celebrated individuals who ate the glorious meals that he set before them would ultimately count less than the readers of his books. By the early nineteenth century the emphasis in the culinary enterprise had shifted from the traditional marketplace of elite consumers in private settings to the visibly stratified, but rapidly expanding modern market. An urbanizing and increasingly mobile post-revolutionary France called for cultural goods of a different order. The associations with the great that served so well in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ill suited a market in which print media increasingly mediated social as well as commercial relations. By redirecting culinary practice out of the kitchen to the larger public, printed texts translated the aristocratic cuisine of the Ancien régime for a more inclusive bourgeois public. That larger public in turn justified French cuisine as a national undertaking rather than the more obvious class endeavor that it had been under the Ancien régime. Only in the nineteenth century did French cuisine come to stand for France.

Carême’s nouvelle cuisine proved compelling. It aggressively rationalized culinary practice, aestheticized culinary discourse, and “nationalized” both. In the Cartesian spirit of rational analysis that presides over French culture, Carême formulated a discourse on culinary method. His culinary code reached beyond immediate production to reproduction. It converted an interlocking system of culinary practices into a rationalized system of preparation. In place of a collection of recipes, Carême patiently constructed an interlocking system in which each dish took its rightful place. If Carême “invented” French cuisine, achieving a culinary immortality that Oscar Wilde’s fanciful character only dreamed about, it was because he created not one sauce but a comprehensive system of sauces, and soups and pastry and meats and vegetables. Though Carême proudly, even ostentatiously, worked for private patrons, the method that he promoted so resolutely perfectly fit the requirements of the restaurant. Not content to refine the cuisine that he inherited, Carême reinvented it. To invoke a modern model of cultural creation, he invented a paradigm. 1 “I repeat it without fear,” he affirmed in his last work, “nineteenth-century French cuisine will remain the model of the beautiful in culinary art.”

A Revolutionary Career

Well before he died in 1833 at the age of forty-nine, Marie-Antoine Carême had achieved legendary status. The author of several magisterial works on the art of cooking, Carême

Right: Portrait of Carême. This portrait aims at reducing the social distance between the chef and his public. The carefully informal coiffure, the flowing drapery, loose collar, floppy tie, and no signature hat take the chef out the kitchen, quite possibly into a salon. Engraving by Blanchard after a portrait by Steuben. From Les Classiques de la table (1845).
COURTESY OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
was fully convinced that he had in truth invented modern French cuisine: “Mine will be the honor and the merit of having been the first to treat our great cuisine in the grand manner, and to have borrowed nothing from anyone” (Le Cuisinier parisien, p. 20). His contemporaries agreed. Some forty years later, Alexandre Dumas, the enormously popular author of The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo, a gastronome of renown and a cook of note, did not hesitate to call Carême “the king of cooking,” one who, unlike a good many other kings who had lost their principalities over the tumultuous nineteenth century, remained firmly on his throne. “Who is to say,” Dumas mused in yet another meditation on the art of cooking, “that Carême will not live longer than Horace?” Much later, even as he worked to bring the classical French cuisine of the nineteenth century in line with the mores and the mood of the twentieth, the great chef Auguste Escoffier declared flatly that “the fundamental principles of the science [of cooking], which we owe to Carême…will last as long as Cooking itself.”

Escoffier’s praise is especially noteworthy given the dismissal of Carême that has occasioned much commentary in the twentieth century. The homage of many modern critics often turns out to be rather backhanded praise. The most effusive acknowledgements of Carême tend to relegate his culinary creations appear to us today as truly impracticable. Many of his strikingly imaginative, architecturally inspired culinary creations remain curiosities, part of the world of virtuoso culinary contests, and of little use in the everyday kitchen. The intricate pavilions and exotic landscapes with spun sugar and almond paste in which the chef delighted remind moderns of nothing so much as Emma Bovary’s wedding cake with its colonnaded temple, turret, and lakes of jam and boats of slivered hazelnuts topped with a Cupid caught in mid-air on a chocolate swing. Often read as a parody, Flaubert’s description is also a straightforward representation of the fancy confections made for special occasions that became widely available in the post-Carême culinary world. Wedding cakes today can rival Flaubert’s, extravaganza for extravaganza.

Yet, to see these creations as the final sputtering of Ancien régime extravaganzas or to stress the difficulty of the preparations is to overlook Carême’s modernity. Carême modernized cooking by creating a cuisine in what he saw as the “spirit of analysis of the nineteenth century” (L’art [1833] 1: lxvi), a self-contained set of rules and procedures governing culinary production. When Carême pronounced simplicity as his watchword (cf. Le Maître d’hôtel, 1:8), he meant the rational simplicity of a culinary system. This “elegant” system, to use another of his favorite terms, laid the foundations for the profession of cooking. Thanks to his work, although in ways that Carême did not anticipate and probably would not have welcomed, cooking flourished, not merely as the trade that it always had been but as a profession. In contrast to the artisan who learns through personal example, the chef would now acquire his education through mastery of a body of systematized knowledge. Carême’s culinary practice and his exceptional career provided models for the ambitious chef; his publications constructed the nascent profession. Carême counts as the first professional chef, someone who considered his work and his career in terms of an occupation with articulated rules, norms, and values that practitioners were bound to follow. There were great culinary practitioners before Carême, but “unfortunately for the culinary arts,” the great maîtres d’hôtel and chefs de cuisine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries never wrote “even two lines” (Le Cuisinier parisien, 18, n.1). Carême considered those who did write culinary works a sorry lot, with their “ridiculous books that are a disgrace to our great national cuisine” (Le Pâtissier pittoresque, 1:5). He took great pains to refute their claims to culinary competence, often point by point. The few old recipes that he decided to “rejuvenate” were the great exceptions among all the works that he disdained as mostly “warmed up left-overs” (L’art [1833], 1: lxv).

Although Carême was unquestionably a great practitioner, the transformation of his culinary practice into a professional norm depended on the writing that took his practice out of the kitchen. His books established a singular position. Unlike his predecessors, Carême cooked for the wealthy. At the time it was a necessary credential. However, unlike these predecessors, who communicated within a largely oral culture and relied on a network of personal connections, Carême used print to stimulate a very different kind of social interaction, more impersonal, close to anonymous, and much more comprehensive. Carême may have looked to the past; he wrote for the present and the future. His conception of his mission altered as he ever more self-consciously fixed French cuisine as a system. Carême’s cuisine was modern, it was French, and it was for all of the French: “My book is not written for great houses alone. On the contrary, I want it to have a general utility. … I would like every citizen in our beautiful France to be able to eat delicious food.” (L’art [1833], 1: lviii–lix). Carême may have worked for the elite; he remained withal a child of the Revolution.
Carême’s reliance on the printed word and his insistence on the significance of his publications placed him squarely in the camp of the moderns, but, in truth, this chef straddled two worlds. The dual allegiances sustained an unprecedented culinary authority, both for his contemporaries, sensitive to the prestige of his traditional elite associations, and for his successors, who routinized a profession on his culinary innovations. Carême’s life, his career, and his work negotiated tradition and modernity, the Ancien régime and the nineteenth century, and the combination allowed him to initiate French cuisine and determine its future.

Carême had the good fortune to debut on the culinary stage at an exceptionally opportune moment. Born in 1783, with no firsthand knowledge of the events of the Revolution, he was well aware of how much and how quickly things culinary had changed from the Ancien régime, and how his own career was implicated in those changes. He made no secret of his personal inclination for the culinary patronage characteristic of the Ancien régime and his sense of the deleterious culinary consequences of political upheaval.

During the Revolution, not least because of the widespread food shortages, gastronomy suffered from “years of calamity and misery” (L’art [1994], Pt. 4, Chap. 3, 297).

The political and social displacements and the economic opportunities of the turbulent 1790s opened an archetypal revolutionary path. As Carême told his story, he was one of twenty-five children whose father, overcome by poverty, abandoned him in the street at the age of eleven. The boy never saw his family again. A providential light in a window led him to a small eating establishment where he worked until, at sixteen, he moved to a proper restaurant. Soon thereafter, he apprenticed at Bailly’s, a celebrated Parisian pastry-maker. These years of pastry apprenticeship gave Carême his schooling. He embarked on his own education, spending whatever time he could find in the Royal Library. He devoured classical and French culinary treatises along with the architectural works that defined his ambitions. Known as the “Palladio of French cuisine,” he even published a series of architectural drawings. A self-made man, Carême was also, very emphatically, a self-educated man, at once inordinately proud of his learning and obsequiously humble about his beginnings.

At Bailly’s Carême soon attracted the attention of one of the best customers, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the renowned connoisseur and consummate courtier-politician, Minister of Foreign Affairs during Napoleon’s Empire and, subsequently, under the restored monarchy of Louis xviii. (It was said of the wily Talleyrand that Brie cheese was the only master he never betrayed.) Both through his own example and through his head steward, M. Boucher, who had been chef to the Prince de Condé before 1789, Talleyrand gave Carême access to the lavish dining practices of the Ancien régime. Talleyrand recognized the cultural capital represented by Carême’s pièces montées and kept the chef in his employ for over a decade, “lending” him out for special banquets. Carême modeled his conception of haute cuisine on his experiences during the Empire and ever after cited Talleyrand as the ideal patron. Together, the gastronome and the chef create the circumstances under which culinary genius can flourish (see, generally, L’art [1833], z: vi–vii, xvii–xviii).

Surprisingly enough for someone who so insisted on the modernity of his cuisine, Carême had nothing to do with restaurants. Indeed, so incompatible was commerce with his exalted, expansive (and expensive) sense of the culinary arts that he kept the pastry shop he opened on the rue de la Paix in 1803 for little more than a year. Sought after by the Tsar of Russia and for a time chef to the Prince Regent of Great Britain, the future George iv, Carême returned to France in 1819, “his French soul” having found it impossible to live anywhere except France. In 1823, the chef entered the employ of Baron James de Rothschild, where he stayed until 1829, when he retired to finish L’art de la cuisine française au xixe siècle. On January 12, 1833, not yet fifty, having dictated the second two volumes of his last work to his daughter, Carême died, apparently of intestinal tuberculosis, but, “really,” as Dumas put it with his usual hyperbole, “killed by his own genius.”

A Modern Chef

The most celebrated chef in Europe, Carême turned the trade he had learned into a modern occupation, accomplishing for chefs something of what Voltaire had exemplified for men of letters—a seismic shift in the possibilities of the occupation itself. Like Voltaire, who moved from courtier to courted, Carême rose to a substantial as well as an honorable estate. He himself acknowledged that he made a good deal of money so that if he spent his own money on his culinary art, as he both complained and boasted, he had the money to spend. He could well afford his own carriage and could afford to assert, unlike most chefs (or any restaurateur), that “the chef committed to science is more responsive to the praise given by his Patron than to the handful of gold that he might receive from him” (L’art [1833], z: xix).

The career reached well beyond individual triumph. Carême essentially reconfigured the occupation by joining to the chef as artisan and culinary practitioner the chef as
scholar, scientist, and artist. Henceforth the ambitious chef would have to be all of these things. It was as an artist that Carême made his most prominent contribution to cuisine. The attribution was not new with him, but his practice and precepts did the most to distinguish the artist from the artisan. Although cooking always remains grounded in the artisanal, the modern chef self-consciously takes it into the realm of the aesthetic and the intellectual, which is why Carême’s presentation of self reminds one of similar characterizations of the Romantic artist in these same years: the devotion to the higher cause of art, the personal sacrifices, often to the detriment of one’s health, the pride in one’s chosen vocation, and the refusal to accept treatment as hired help (to wit, as an artisan). At the same time, Carême subscribed to the Ancien régime model of the artist sustained by the unfailingly generous patron whose tastes not only coincided but also complemented one another. “The man born to wealth lives to eat, and sustains the art of the chef” (L’art [1833], z: vii). Accordingly, Carême turned down or quit positions that lacked the requisite personnel and budget support. If Carême appears deferential, even obsequious, he also insisted on the reciprocal obligations of the patron. Pride and humility came in the same breath.

Most of all Carême insisted on public recognition of the chef’s social and artistic superiority. At the very front of Le Maître d’hôtel he placed an engraving of two chefs, the old and the new. The hat, he explained, made the difference (z: 279–280). Carême had for some time been seeking a way to change the manner of wearing the distinctive cotton cap (bonnet) whose absolute whiteness guaranteed the cleanliness that he considered the hallmark of the chef. A cap on a stiff circle seemed both more graceful and more suitable: “a chef ought to look like a man in good health, but our usual cap made us look ill.” The elegant curls of the young chef (reminiscent of the engraving we have of Carême) also show to good effect with the new cap placed rather rakishly on the side of the head, in a pose not altogether unsuitable for a Romantic poet. Although chefs did not adopt the monumental and considerably less flattering stiff high hat (toque) until later in the century, Carême’s modifications signaled the will to raise the estate of cook in the public eye.

Carême pushed the practitioner into modern times. “I intend to use all means to accelerate the progress of our work by making [dishes] easier to execute, all the more so as the results are the same” (L’art [1994], Pt.4, Chap.1, 288). His works abound in inventions, his own and those he vouched for. His efforts alone, he boasted, had more than doubled the material available to pastry chefs (Le Pâtissier royal, six), and the unknown inventor of the pastry tube earned his undying gratitude. Nor did he neglect the less agreeable aspects of the kitchen, detailing how he had rid the ovens of the omnipresent bugs (his stratagem caught 1,215 of them!) (Le Pâtissier royal, 2: 410–411). He had roasting skewers made to his specifications (L’art [1994], Pt.3, Chap.1, 162), ordered a special ladle to dispense just the right amount of sauce, and offered detailed instructions on organizing a kitchen along with a technique for reducing the basic sauces to concentrates to be used as needed. It was entirely fitting that an early English translator should stress not only Carême’s “abilities,” which “transcended the generality of writers on the art,” and his imagination, which “greatly enlarged the variety of entrées and entremêts previously practised,” but also the “clear & perspicuous details [that] render them facile, not only for the Artist who has already an advance in his profession, but also to those whose knowledge of the higher code of the Kitchen has necessarily been limited.”

A Modern Cuisine

What of the food Carême actually served? The virtuoso pastry creations that set this extraordinary career in motion turn out to be the least modern elements of his work. The career that began with pastry ended with a comprehensive treatise on French cuisine. His first two published works on pastry prepared him for the whole of French cuisine. (At the time pastry covered doughs for hot and cold pâtés, rice casseroles, timbales, cakes, soufflés, and fondue as well as desserts.) The gigantic pièces montées tied this work to the great banquets of the past; his written work placed his cuisine squarely in the democratizing temper of modern society. These pages made his bid to posterity. Repeatedly, Carême’s written work demonstrated, indeed, proved (to use a term of which he was fond) the absolute and incontestable superiority of his modern cuisine.

At the same time that Carême directed his writings to the nascent profession of cooking, he addressed a larger public of gourmands, hosts, and even women needing to instruct their (female and presumably illiterate) cooks. In other words, these culinary texts aimed both to instruct practitioners and consumers and also, more generally, to
convince both groups that this was the way to culinary excellence. Carême insisted that these treatises were both elementary and practical, that is, fundamental and doable. Taking his stand firmly on the side of progress, Carême worked diligently to prove the superiority of modern culinary practices. His culinary treatises drove the bourgeoisification and potential professionalization of Ancien régime grande cuisine. Following a pattern characteristic of other Ancien régime elite cultural products from literary works to drama and opera, French cuisine shifted class. To be sure, cuisine bourgeoise existed under the Ancien régime but as a scaled-down variant of the grande cuisine tied to the aristocracy and the court. Although cuisine bourgeoise probably covers as much ground as the bourgeois itself, it is usually associated with (relative) abundance and (relative) simplicity anchored in traditional (but not peasant) foodways. In the nineteenth century, cuisine bourgeoise evolved between the elaborate haute cuisine of official banquets and great restaurants, on the one hand, and traditional regional foodways, on the other.11

That Carême defined his cuisine by its simplicity startled only if we forget that he always took the extravagant elite cuisine of the Ancien régime as his point of reference. He criticized the excessive decorations (Le Pâtissier pittoresque, xxii–xxvii) for which “ridiculous” was not too strong a term. Table settings, too, benefited from simplification. Reducing the number of people seated at table not only gave each diner more space, it set off the dishes to greater advantage. In addition, just to underscore the contrast, he appended two foldouts to Le Maître d’hôtel, one from a dinner described in Vincent La Chapelle’s celebrated Le Cuisinier moderne from 1735, which he placed against the pared-down setting for one of his own dinners. Carême honored his predecessor (for whom he named a sauce). Still, as he surely meant the comparison to demonstrate, nineteenth-century France had rendered La Chapelle’s eighteenth-century cuisine sorely out-of-date.

Simplicity implied a host of other qualities—harmony, elegance, and above all, that notoriously slippery attribute, good taste. It signaled a “naturalness” in the foods used and prepared. Well before receiving her dinner invitation, the English writer Lady Morgan knew that Carême had declared war on excessive spices, and, indeed, Carême made much of his preference for herbs (tarragon, chervil, parsley, etc.) over the heavily spiced cuisine of earlier years. This elimination of spices continued a trend begun in the seventeenth century at least, of setting the nouvelle cuisine of the moment against its heavy, excessive predecessors. Carême made good on the promises of his predecessors. Lady Morgan’s anticipation was well rewarded: the dinner surpassed her expectations, and her account is justifiably famous for conveying a sense of how Carême’s cooking tasted. Many of our own culinary preferences are already present—the importance of seasonal products, the dominance of natural aromas. Carême’s cuisine sounds remarkably appropriate for the twenty-first century:

Its character…was that it was in season…up to its time, in the spirit of the age…no high-spiced sauces, no dark brown gravies, no flavour of cayenne and allspice, no tincture of catsup and walnut pickle…Every meat presented its own natural aroma, every vegetable its own shade of verdure.12

This simplicity identified culinary modernity. When Carême affirmed that French cuisine of the nineteenth century would remain the model for the future, this is what he has in mind, a creation where no single element stands out either in any given dish or in the dinner as a whole. Whence the importance of precise measurements where all the seasonings are “perfectly fused” (L’art [1994] Pt.4, Chap.4, 302). To take just one example, the turtle soup that English cooks over-spice has to be rendered more subtle (L’art [1994], Pt.1, Chap.13, 111). We are not surprised to find that this great admirer of Rossini’s gastronomic as well as musical virtuosity should invoke “harmony” as his goal (L’art [1994], Pt.1, Chap.23, 157).

If Carême can be considered the inventor of modern French cuisine, it is because he put it all together, the old methods along with the new techniques, in a fundamental, coherent structure where all the pieces, all the recipes, and all the sundry observations appended to each section make sense in relationship to one another. This comprehensive culinary system constituted a whole that no other French cookbook had attempted, much less achieved. Carême’s final work, L’art de la cuisine française au xixe siècle, laid out this system. The work begins with the pot au feu, basic boiled beef, and it begins not with a recipe but with an analysis that details exactly what happens when the housewife sets her pot on the fire, how she gets the savory beef bouillon that is the basis of the stew, and how to obtain the same results. It is impossible to overestimate the importance in opening with a familiar dish known to and tasted by all.11 The basic bouillon recipe directs the reader to a series of bouillons, from chicken to turkey, partridge, and wild rabbit, ending with one that can be used to enrich vegetable soups. The second chapter moves to consommés and fumets, the third to lean or Lenten bouillons, the fourth examines medicinal bouillons, the fifth tackles court bouillons and
cuisine, and French cuisine alone, is “universal.” Where and everywhere supports the belief that French those techniques. The technical basis that is applicable any-
the meal, like the music, depends on the exploitation of
of harmony that every musician must master. Thereafter,
techniques of French cuisine could be learned like the rules
that is so often invoked where cooking is concerned, the
system of interconnected parts that built on a singular base
for this cuisine to range as it did. In the musical comparison
claimed French cuisine owed to Carême—made it possible
of fundamental principles—those principles that Escoffier
system of interconnected parts that built on a singular base
“the present universal reception amongst the profession,
be ridiculous, and, in the event, unnecessary, since, given
they may be deemed as universally understood.” Like
ballet (another art formed in seventeenth-century France),
cuisine would continue to speak French.
Even if Carême did not invent all the dishes that he
explicated, he named a good many of them, conferring an
identity that stamped this cuisine as indelibly French. Rather
than naming only a single basic soup, for example—turtle
or fish or shrimp bisque—and specifying variations, Carême
baptized each preparation, however minor the difference
between it and the base recipe. Sometimes the names refer
to the ingredients, particularly for the basic preparation in
each category (shrimp bisque) in hopes that “young practi-
tioners” will find them easier to remember (L’art [1994],
Pt. 1, Chap. 12, 110). The variants, on the other hand, tend
to bear honorific, geographical, or historical names (shrimp
bisque, for example, comes à la française, à la Corneille, à
l’amiral de Rigny, à la Périgord, à la princesse, au chasseur,
à la régence, and à la royale). To see this linguistic culi-
inary system at work, consider turtle soup à la Washington.
To the basic soup (cross-referenced to Chapter 8 on French
turtle soups and Chapter 13 for English turtle soup), Carême
added an escabeche of salmon sautéed in butter and seasoned
with salt and cayenne pepper, which he served with eel
quenelles flavored with anchovy butter. A shrimp paste made
from the tails of the shrimp added the finishing touch. For
turtle soup à la New York, filets of spit-roasted white sturgeon
and quenelles of smelts made with shrimp paste replaced
the salmon and the eel quenelles.
As the turtle soups testify, Carême “frenchified” foreign
dishes to make them palatable to French tastes and practica-
ble for French chefs. The three American soups are all turtle
soups, variants of the original English recipe. Because trav-
elers to Boston and New York had indicated that Americans
added eel, Carême had to alter the soup to account for its
effects. These were “American” turtle soups in name only,
“American” soups “that can be executed in Europe, and
particularly in France.” In other words, these soups emigrated
from American to French kitchens, translated into Carême’s
distinctly, and distinctively, national idiom. Like so many
other chefs before and since, Carême had no doubt that
France is “the motherland of anyone who entertains guests;
such national culinary destiny more in
evidence than in the “Preliminary Remarks” of the Cuisinier
parisien (1828), which Carême used to demolish one M.
Martin, the “compiler” of a work he had the “presumption”
to call the Bréviaire du gastronome (The Gastronome’s

Culinary Nationalism
This spirit of universality depended heavily on language.
Carême constructed his culinary model on a linguistic
system, putting together a lexicon that, like every language,
could be used by different users to their own purposes.
The perfect vehicle for the diffusion of haute cuisine in
restaurants, the linguistic system that carried this rational-
ized culinary system nonetheless remained intensely
national. The internationalization and the nationalization of
French cuisine proceeded apace. Translations mostly
kept the French designations. As one of Carême’s early
English translators observed, “like other names of science,
deduced from other languages,” these names had become
technical, and, hence, untranslatable. Anglicization would
be ridiculous, and, in the event, unnecessary, since, given
the present universal reception amongst the profession,
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Carême’s devastating critique of Martin as no more than a “charlatan” and “a sorry plagiarist” made the case for the superiority of French cuisine. Carême could only deplore the abysmal ignorance that led Martin to bemoan the foreign presence in French cuisine: “the dishes of French cuisine on the contrary bear the most illustrious names of the French nobility: à la Reine, à la Dauphine, à la Royale” and so on, for seventeen more names. Carême then launched into a litany of other French names, mostly geographical in origin: “à la Parisienne, à la Française, à la Lyonnaise, à la Bordelaise… and many others that escape me” (Le Cuisinier parisien, 26–27). The foreign names for the basic brown and white sauces, espagnole (Spanish) and allemande (German), led the hapless Martin to lament the absence of a single truly French sauce. Carême set the record straight. Because the so-called Spanish sauce was brought to France to celebrate Louis XIV’s bestowal of the Spanish throne on his son, it was, we might say now, functionally French. In any case, whatever the origins of the espagnole, “we have perfected it so much since then” that it no longer has anything much to do with the original import. Similarly, for the so-called German sauce, it is certainly to their credit that the French honored the presumed source of this white sauce. However, because the French “have made it as unctuous and as smooth as it is perfect,” Carême concludes grandly that “these foreign sauces are so changed in their preparations, that they have long since been entirely French.” In short, with French savoir-faire, the foreign ceases to be foreign—which is certainly a good thing since “no foreign sauce can be compared to those of our great modern cuisine” (Le Cuisinier parisien, 25–28).

Carême elaborated an entire linguistic system to secure and enrich this Frenchness. At the end of the section on French soups in L’art de la cuisine française, he noted that he had changed the names of several soups from his earlier work in order to confer on them the names of great Frenchmen. True to his word, of the 368 sauces in Part Four, Carême gave names I could identify to over one-third. The largest category of those honored for individual achievement come from the arts, literature, and the sciences, both contemporaries such as Victor Hugo, Rossini, and Paganini and classics such as Molière, Corneille, Pascal, and Virgil. There are also military men and royalty, both French and foreign, and especially important, those with connections to gastronomy, both chefs (four) and hosts, including, of course, Carême’s own employers—Talleyrand (sauce Bénévent from his title as Prince de Bénévent), Rothschild, George IV, the Princesse Bagration), but also the culinary writers Brillat-Savarin and Grimod (de la Reynière).\textsuperscript{17}

Other sauces take us on a tour of the French provinces, from Brittany to Marseilles, from Bordeaux to Champagne. Of 112 sauces with geographical designations, slightly over half carry French names. Even the sauces that designate a foreign person or place carry names that are linguistically French. The language frenchifies the appellations just as the cuisine frenchifies the sauces themselves. Foreign names generally appear in French dress, which makes Saint-Pierre, Ciceron, Mécène, Virgile, and Arioste fully as French as Victor Hugo or Mme de Sévigné. Whereas the sauces with regional or foreign variations often connect to the products associated with the region—Périgord raises visions of truffles, Provence brings in garlic and tomatoes, Normandy touts its cream and shellfish—just as often, and particularly for sauces à la parisiennne or à la française, there is no particular relationship at all. In other words, the system conveys the meaning, not the external referent. This self-referentiality and self-sufficiency identify the linguistic-culinary code that, in turn, singles out Carême’s cuisine. Given the organization around an independent system of interlocking parts, this cuisine, with its own language, could go anywhere—as, in fact, it did. Wherever it went, French cuisine took French history, French culture, and French geography right along with the batterie de cuisine. For producers and consumers alike, the new world of gastronomy called for new words. Another intrepid explorer of the culinary, Carême’s contemporary, Brillat-Savarin, warned his readers about the neologisms that they would find in the Physiologie du goût (1826). How could he not need new words when ideas and practices are changing all the time?\textsuperscript{18} For Carême as for Brillat-Savarin, linguistic invention would shape the new worlds of French cuisine and French culture.

The Competition

Still and all, and as he was the first to acknowledge, Carême did not spring fully armed from the head of either Zeus or his chef. Take, for example, the systematization of culinary practice. The very first French cookbook of the seventeenth century, La Varenne’s Le Cuisinier français (1651), made a point of its utility, the separate sections for basic recipes, recipes classified by their place in the meal, a chapter for Lenten dishes, cross references between sections, and, in the second edition, three alphabetical tables. The very title of Le Cuisinier méthodique (1660) validated the importance of codified culinary techniques, and the otherwise unidentified L.S.R. in L’art de bien traiter (1674) promised “a method that has not at all been seen or taught.” Carême’s contemporaries, chefs and authors Alexandre Viard and Antoine
Beauvilliers, also made much of the rules that their works conveyed. This emphasis on order is not unexpected: by definition cookbooks proscribe as well as prescribe. In a word, they legislate.

Nor did it take a revolution to set culinary polemics in motion, as one new cuisine after another disputed the old in a never-ending replay of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Every generation fell out over the same issues. In 1674 the belligerent L.S.R. tore into the “absurdities and disgusting lessons” with which La Varenne had gullied “the silly and ignorant populace.” A half-century later, Le Cuisinier moderne (1735) (1733 for a first edition in English) staked out Vincent La Chapelle’s position on the side of the moderns. “Nouvelle cuisine” entered the culinary lexicon in 1742, as the title of the third volume that Menon added to his Nouveau Traité de cuisine of 1739. In making explicit the principles that informed their cookbooks and marking their particular culinary territories, these argumentative prefaces conveyed a heightened consciousness of culinary and social change and staked out each author’s place in that development. For culinary moderns, society changes, and cuisine should follow suit.

Not even culinary nationalism originated with Carême. As in so many other domains, the French early on arrogated pride of place. As early as 1654, Nicolas de Bonnefons’s Les Délices de la campagne (Delights of the Countryside) enjoined readers to leave “depraved ragouts” to foreigners, who in any case “never enjoy good fare except when they have cooks from France.” The scathing criticisms that L.S.R. leveled at La Varenne scored the latter’s failure to distinguish between the delicate preparations suitable to the gentle climate of France and the “wretched foods” that might be
tolerated in exotic climes but not in “a purified climate such as ours, where propriety, delicacy and good taste are the object and the substance of our most solid enthusiasms.”

Time and foreign experience had little effect on this conviction. Well over a century later, in Le Cuisinier Étranger (The Foreign Cook) (1851), which was published bound with a cookbook on French cuisine, the author-chef justified a work on foreign dishes largely as therapy for the “palates of our most celebrated gastronomes jaded by the excellence of French cuisine.” The author had to admit that a work on European cuisines was “without glory”—a term presumably applicable to French cuisine alone—yet he could hope that it would not be “without utility.” A page count sets his priorities straight: 53 pages of recipes from all of Europe look meager indeed when set against the 280 pages for French cuisine.

Of course, even Carême had to reckon with competitors. The more than thirty editions of Alexandre Viard’s Cuisinier impérial (The Imperial Chef) (1806) made it the most popular work published by a professional in the nineteenth century. This popularity makes Viard’s modesty all the more remarkable. He had none of Carême’s overweening ambition nor did he advance any claim to treat cuisine “in general.” To the contrary, he frankly acknowledged that he did not have it in him to write the ten volumes that such an enterprise would require (and the annual update that would be needed). Antoine Beauvilliers (1754–1817) wrote with the authority of forty years of experience, primarily as an exceptional restaurateur. In 1814, when he published L’art du cuisinier (The Art of the Chef) he was still running the Grande Taverne de Londres, which he had opened over thirty years earlier. Like Carême and just about everyone else who thought about gastronomy, Beauvilliers subscribed to the superiority of French cuisine. Like Carême, he aimed at a broad public, assuring readers that even housewives could profit by his book. In contrast to Carême’s fixation with the future, and as befit an older generation that had known the Ancien régime, Beauvilliers saw his work as an end rather than a beginning. These observations made his “final adieux.”

An outsized, legendary figure, Carême stood, if not alone, then assuredly head and shoulders above his contemporaries. It was Carême whom Balzac cited repeatedly as the epitome of the creative modern chef, just as it was Carême, not Viard or Beauvilliers, whom Dumas characterized as the “apostle of gastronomes,” the only chef honored with a full entry in his encyclopedic Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine. Finally, Escoffier saw Carême, not his competitors, as the founder of modern French cuisine. As with other Romantic heroes who turn out to be very much a part of their times, Carême’s genius, his “invention” of French cuisine, lay in the way he capitalized on and magnified trends well in evidence. For this we admit him as a modern. In his tireless self-promotion we recognize the all-too-familiar hype that borders on vanity. At the same time we acknowledge his absolute dedication to the culinary enterprise.

What of our own parlous times of nouvelles cuisines that multiply with every newspaper article? Of fulminations against fat, on people and in foods? Of adventures into exotic taste territories? Of prime-time chefs who play to the crowds? Neither contemporary culinary journalism nor the Food Network has much to do with Carême (though he would make a terrific challenger on “Iron Chef”). Yet, even on the American culinary scene, this great ancestor makes himself felt.

Having written his way out of the kitchen, Carême may well be finding his way back, in a culinary hero for our time as well as his own.

Notes


2. Jean-Claude Bonnet, “Carême, or the Last Sparks of Decorative Cuisine,” in Antonin Carême, L’art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle, 2 vols. (Paris: chez l’auteur, 1853), 2.15 (Quatrième Partie). Quotes to this edition will be cited as L’art [1853]. Although the modern edition of this work (Paris: Payot, 1994) lacks the prefatory material, aphorisms, and sundry observations that are so revelatory of Carême’s obsessions, it is more useful for the analysis of the art. It will be cited as L’art (1994). The other citations to Carême are to Le Pâtissier royal parisien (1815), 3d. ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1845), Le Pâtissier pâtissière (1815), 4th édition (Paris: 1845); Le Cuisinier Parisien (1828); Le Cuisinier impérial (1833), 3d. ed., 2 vols. (Paris: J. Renouard et Cie, 1845). All translations are mine.


5. See Kimberly Stevens, “A 24-Karat Wedding Cake with Diamonds You Eat,” New York Times, 23 March 2001. One cake was in the form of a pyramid, another constructed of Ferragamo, Jourdain, and Blahnik shoeboxes topped with a fire-red, high-heel Blahnik slingback formed from edible hand-sculptured sugar. Although Carême might have found the blatant commercialism, he would have appreciated the architectural confections.


8. Frédéric Fayot (Carême’s secretary), “Notice sur Antoine Carême,” in Justin Améro, Les Classiques de la Table (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1855), 2: 178–187, see also Dumas, “Carême,” Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine. Carême’s names are variously given as Marie-Antoine, Antoine, and, his apparent preference, with which he signed his works beginning with the 1822 Le Maître d’hôtel français, the classically inflected Antonin. Louis XVIII authorized him to sign “Carême de Paris,” which he did, beginning with Le Maître d’hôtel français.

9. Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine, 24. His secretary relied on Carême’s notes to complete volumes four and five of L’art de la cuisine française, which was published later that year.


16. Naming dishes after famous personages seems to have begun in earnest in the late seventeenth century, a gesture that ennobled simultaneously the food and the consumer. From Le Cuisinier français in 1691 with famous names for only .02 percent of its recipes, to Massiot’s Le Cuisinier royal et bourgeois (1691) with 10.2 percent, and Menon’s La Cuisinière bourgeoise (1746) with 14.5 percent, an astounding 68.67 percent of the recipes in Carême’s L’art de la cuisine française (1832) (68.67 recipes out of 1245) carry celebrated names. By 1844, this nominatory proliferation required publication of a handbook for ready reference. Edmond Neirinck and Jean-Pierre Poulain, Histoire de la cuisine et des cuisiniers (Paris: Éditions Jacques Lanon, 2000), 6–65.

17. There are also 188 lean variants of the 358 sauces, ragouts, garnitures, and essences. Of the 129 names, 83 are French. Of the 123 identified names, 16 percent represent the military (17 men plus 3 battles), 43 percent the aristocracy (55 individuals), 13 percent (16) religious, 36 percent (44) arts, letters and sciences, 15 percent (16) are connected with gastronomy as hosts (Apicius, Brillat-Savarin, Grimaldi de la Reina), Lucullus, Rothschild, ...), as chefs or maîtres d’hôtel (Lagniipierre, Robert, Vatel, Vincent La Chapelle), and as supposed inventors of the sauce in question (béchamel, magnoisine [mayonnaise]). The considerable overlap in these categories, especially for the aristocracy and the military, explains why the total is not 100 percent.


20. Avertissement, A. T. Raimbault, Le Cuisinier Étranger pour faire suite au Parfait Cuisinier. Contenant une Notice rassemblée de tous les mets étrangers qu’on peut servir sur une table française, 2d edition (Paris: Delacour, 1814). Notice the promise of the subtitle to present all the foreign dishes that might possibly find a spot on a French table!


