Consuming Passions
Eating and the Stage at the Fin de Siècle

Legend has it that at the public dress rehearsal of Cyrano de Bergerac in 1897 Edmond Rostand’s wife cleared out a local charcuterie of pâtés, hams, and sausages in an attempt to dress the set more lavishly for Ragueneau’s pastry shop.  

Cyrano, as befits a play that pivots on an olfactory apparatus, is festooned with food. In the opening act at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, orange wenches dispense refreshments from a buffet, and the second act, laid in that pâtisserie, overflows with cream-laden delicacies and the discussion and devouring thereof. On the battlefield of the fourth act, a starving regiment is satiated before our eyes as a coach is deconstructed into a migratory mess hall. Even in the last act, which takes place at a convent, the nuns offer the undernourished Cyrano a grand bol de bouillon. Much of this provender serves as a foil for the protagonist: while others gorge, our prodigy of the proboscis is noticeably abstemious, accepting only half a macaroon, a glass of water, and a grape from an orange-girl, refraining in the pastry shop and on the battlefield; in the convent garden we are told he has eaten nothing for two days. The hero’s sober virtue is set in sharp relief by the conspicuous consumption he spurns.

Cyrano was clearly marching to a different drumstick. At the fin de siècle French haute cuisine and French theater were considered the summits of their respective spheres: Escoffier and Bernhardt were ranked as luminaries of equivalent brilliance. Although even the most publicity-avid chefs did not make public appearances, their professional skills were translated to the stage. Characters recited recipes: Ragueneau’s verses on making almond tarts in 1873 offered a trio devoted to peeling potatoes, and by the end of the century, James Herne’s Sag Harbor (1898) had replicated a Thanksgiving dinner, while George Bernard Shaw had served up a five-course al fresco luncheon in You Never Can Tell (1898). This trend reached its apogee during the First World War: for Come Out of the Kitchen (1916) Henry Miller imported a black cook from Virginia, fitted up a dressing room as a kitchen with an electric stove, and had her provide a chicken and cornbread dinner every night of the long run. “Nothing,” wrote a journalist in the Nation, “piques an audience more than stage meals.”

This attraction of audiences to scenes of eating can be traced back to the Empire, when any mention of “capons, partridges, or gluttony in general” was met with enthusiastic applause. There it participated in the new cult of the restaurant. The profusion of such scenes in the second half of the nineteenth century may also be related to growing familiarity with dining out, but, in artistic terms, it is also a logical extension of naturalism. Shaw had noted that “‘teacup-and-saucer’ drama, derived from the first incursions of realistic properties,” is telling in this respect. And the pioneer operation was the stodgy mass of dough and jam confected into a familiar English dessert in the last act of Tom Robertson’s Ours. Clement Scott tells us that it “was composed of excellent materials and became the perquisite of some favored attendants, who for their supper enjoyed the ‘roley-poley pudding’ made in the Crimean hut by Miss Mary Netley.”

Still, pragmatism’s limitations tended to confine these demonstrations to mere show-and-tell. In Zola’s novel of the Central Markets, Le Ventre de Paris (1887), the episode in the kitchen of Quenu’s charcuterie bears a specific symbolic
The making of a boudin, a blood sausage, is contrasted with the personal narration by the protagonist Florent of his sufferings as a political detainee and his tortuous escape from a French prison colony in South America. Zola interweaves this agonized narrative with the detailed mechanics of sausage making, so that gradually the ponderous, sanguinary routines of the bourgeois butcher’s family occlude the hero’s political ideals and implicate him in their materialism. Soothed and suffocated by the aromas of sizzling fat, fried onions, bubbling pig’s blood, Florent succumbs to their wishes and agrees to join the imperial civil service as a seafood inspector in Les Halles. The completion of the sausage and the hero’s capitulation occur simultaneously. In the stage adaptation of the novel, however, making a boudin proved to be impractical, so it was replaced by the assemblage of a simple galantine. The symbolic quantum of the procedure went by the board, and the audience probably paid less attention to the account of Florent’s travails than to the stuffing of a boned fowl. What had been a literary tour de force became, in the theater, a mere tour de forcemeat.

One such contradiction is that as the conventional drama was becoming more fixed and torpid, congealing into what Brecht would later sneer at as the “culinary theatre,” the culinary cultures of the bourgeois restaurant and the home kitchen were growing more daring, experimental, and inventive. Gastronomy was evolving into the perfect synthesis of the arts, and producers turned to their audience’s eating habits for their coups de théâtre. One could draw a parallel between the well-made play, with its carefully scheduled surprises and scènes à faire, with the newly introduced, so-called Russian service dinner. Instead of dumping all the dishes on the table at once, the orderly progression of courses built to dramatic climaxes and a satisfactory denouement. The grave ritual of a middle-class Victorian dinner party provided the structure for F. Anstey’s comedy The Man from Blankley’s (1901), each of the three acts another phase in the ceremonial sequence.

The dining room, as a function-specific space in a private home, was another nineteenth-century novelty allowing for ostentation. The theatrical analogy was underlined by a
French writer in 1894: “The dining-room is a theatre of which the kitchen is the backstage area and the table the stage. This theatre needs fitting-up [aménagement], this stage needs scenery, this kitchen needs machinery.”

Allowed no rehearsals for the single performance, the producer-host must contrive a design for the table and its decorations, magnificent place settings, flowers, and candles, all of which beguile the eye while aiding digestion.

The elaboration of table manners and the increasing formality of procedure constituted a performance that served to define social distinctions. Following a tradition that goes back to banquet of the seventeenth century, the sensory rhetoric of the dishes was mirrored by a rhetoric of gesture. The servants, like the property men in Asian theater, discreetly supply the necessary accessories but also perform mime, serving food and filling glasses in silence. The diners, whose manipulation of the numerous utensils must display dexterity—the virtuoso dissection of an artichoke or a lobster—bear responsibility for the dialogue as well as for those monologues known as toasts. The presentation of a spectacularly arranged dish is met with the same silence and gasps of admiration that would greet a prima donna’s trills.

Beyond the private sphere, the proliferation of stage meals reflected the rise of dining out, or the public performance of gastronomy. The development of a complex cuisine, based on well-provisioned markets and the affluence of money and leisure, were dependent on the growth of cities. So was the eventual evolution of the restaurant and, for that matter, the permanent playhouse. Urban culture nurtured phantasms of luxury and sensual pleasure in both sites. The great chef Carême had listed “confectionery” as one of the branches of architecture, and the elaborate constructions of spun sugar and pastry, meant to be admired, not eaten, have analogies in the overwrought interiors of nineteenth-century playhouses. Typically, the restaurant would proliferate in the purlieu of the theaters, the cross-traffic of their clientele the sign of a serious symbiosis.

Stage meals, for the most part, reproduced a form of conspicuous consumption practiced by the more affluent spectators and envied by the less affluent. They served as models of desire: those in the orchestra seats could assuage the appetites raised by the play by repairing to Rector’s or the Savoy Grill and experiencing in reality what had been exhibited on stage, while those in the galleries could sate their unconsummated desires only upon what they had seen.

Both the playhouse and the eating house catered to more than a single variety of desire. One of the distinguishing features of the restaurant, in contradistinction to the tavern or café, was the cabinet particulier or private room, which “lured and enticed patrons with the promise of unknown worlds of delight.” These sites of late-night dalliance, which made supper synonymous with seduction, rapidly became popular settings in farce and dramas, from Labiche to Grand Guignol. Nat Will’s hit song in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1913, “If a Table at Rector’s Could Talk,” signified scandal; and the last line spoken by the heroine of Eugene Walter’s The Easiest Way (1909), “I’m going to Rector’s to make a hit! To hell with the rest!” implied, to New Yorkers at any rate, that she had decided on a career of easy virtue.

The popularity of the palatial hotel in Europe and the lobster palace in America offered settings for chefs to make elaborate displays and for celebrities to exhibit themselves as champion feeders. The elaboration and presentation of food in restaurants became more theatrical, its functionality decreasing in proportion to its aesthetic qualities. “The intellectual satisfaction of the senses” (M.F.K. Fisher’s phrase) was provided for by the serial ordering of gustatory and olfactory qualities. Chefs claimed to orchestrate “taste-symphonies” and “smell-sonatas.”

The expansion of the restaurant menu and the theater program developed almost simultaneously. Just as the simple playbill became replete with advertising and verbose descriptions of scenery and special effects, so the bill of fare printed on cardboard or bristol board, first introduced between 1820 and 1835, reduced surprise while provoking anticipation. In the middle of the century, where the appetite was divided among a succession of dishes, with everything capable of being ordered and paid for, the menu whetted that appetite with promises. The lithographic composition offered a scenario for a feast, the names of the dishes arrayed in columns like dramatis personae. In British theatrical slang figurants and walk-on characters are still known as “Wines & Spirits,” listed at the bottom of the bill.

The phenomenon of naming a dish after an individual, occurring first in the seventeenth century, is an important step in the history of cuisine: rarely were these individuals the cooks who created the recipes, but rather their masters, as in the case of sauce Soubise. By the Napoleonic era new inventions were usually baptized in honor of statesmen (Nesselrodne Pudding) or military victories (Chicken Marengo). Typical is a banquet organized at the Café Anglais in 1867 for the tsar, the king of Prussia, and Count Bismarck, where the dishes all bore the names of diplomats and heads of state past and present. By then, however, this practice had enlarged to accommodate a new form of celebrity: the distinction was now bestowed on divas of the opera, ballet, and drama. It served as homage to their talent but also reflected glory on the chef.
The practice seems to have begun as a Parisian fad during the Empire, when actresses were made guests of honor at special sessions of Grimod de la Reynière’s *Jury dégustateur*, with auxiliary confections invented for the occasion and christened with their names. Among the luminaries of the Comédie Française to be so commemorated in 1812 were Rose Dupuis, Mlle Volnais, and Mlle Mars, a comédienne, a dramatic actress, and a tragédienne, respectively. However, the dishes so named were invariably for pastries, buns, or sweets, intended for a select group of diners. In the words of Rebecca Spang, they “worked to establish the table as a space not of dire nutritional necessity, but of light-hearted urban frivolity....” It was not until the mid-nineteenth century and the burgeoning internationalism of stardom that chefs named substantial dishes after performers and offered them to a restaurant public. In that age of advertisement, the creation of the dish for the performer and in the performer’s name implicated the performer in its consumption, so that the creator and his clientele could have the satisfaction of watching Tétazzini and Caruso tuck into the creations that bore their names. The legendary birth of Peach Melba, conceived in London by Escoffier in 1895 in honor of the Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba and her first success in Wagner, confirmed the ability of hotel restaurants to assure the fortune of a name by associating it with a dessert. Melba expressed her gratification that poires Mary Garden never achieved the acclaim of the dish named for her.

A cookbook published by Delmonico’s chef in 1895 teems with dishes named after Adelina Patti, Rachel, Arthur Sullivan, Ristori, Judic, Verdi, Meyerbeer, and many others. Hit shows were similarly treated—Cold Eggs Frou-Frou, Mikado soup, even noisettes of roebuck Valkyrie. As the poet Émile Goudeau noted, the name of the ice cream that served as a palate cleanser at half-time during a grand banquet “varies each year to take that of the latest play in vogue, becoming by turns Nalisko, Dora, Fédora, Théodora, Strogoff, Mascotte, Tosca, Miss Eylott and so on.” This nomenclature implements a distinction between high and low cuisine, guaranteeing resonance to a recipe, and is translated by a symbolic reference over which those responsible for the serving and the protocol pay close attention. The cook, the gastronome, and even the restaurateur share the glory of those immortalized in a dish, so long as the name retains its fame.

The naming ceremony also added a certain arcaneum to the restaurant menu, so that only an expert could decipher it without asking for help. Each article on the bill of fare intimidated the profane and confounded the sybarites: only the maître d’hôtel could dispel the mystery. What exactly was the Consommé Sarah Bernhardt, which figured at the head of a menu of the Grand Hotel in Florence in 1900? Is there rhyme or reason in associating the tragédienne with a broth composed of chicken, asparagus tips, and champagne? At a dinner made up of such attractions, suggested Goudeau, “One is led naturally to talk theatre, infinite resource always seized by the Parisian with a sincere desire.” An associative response is built up, whereby, in a quasi-Pavlovian manner, talk of theater sets the salivary glands in motion, while chewing and swallowing are accompanied by images of theatrical personalities. Their private lives become incorporated into this gustatory cycle. Abetted by the innovation of the interview, newspapers and magazines ran features on what actors and actresses ate and drank and, particularly, what diets opera singers used to coddle their voices.

The next step in increasing the intimacy between the performer and the audience is to translate the former from the supper table to the kitchen range. It is hard, nevertheless, to imagine the thespian goddesses of the period rolling up their brocade sleeves and rolling out pie crust. That democratic innovation seems to have been an American one, as publishers issued collections of recipes allegedly authored by prominent stars. The earliest such work that I have located is *May Irwin’s Home Cooking* of 1904. Irwin, the buxom star of musical farce, is depicted in a photograph on the cover in apron and mobcap in a kitchen, tasting something from a silver chafing dish: the juxtaposition of the homely wood stove and high society’s favorite party appliance is significant. The recipes similarly range from the plain, many of them apparently transcribed from Irwin’s black cook, Sarah Victor, and employing such humble ingredients as canned corn, fatback, and dripping, to the fancy restaurant fare copied from Delmonico’s and Finnelli’s in Philadelphia. Irwin’s commentary shows her to be seriously interested in the economics as well as the sensual satisfactions of cookery. At the same time, the star is typically American in showing that, beneath the show-business glamour, she is down-to-earth, jus’ folks, on a par with her fans. An anecdote about drinking champagne at Sherry’s will be followed by a talk with an “old Southern Mammy” on how to cook possum.

Right: Alfons Mucha. *Menu for Sarah Bernhardt Day banquet, 9 December 1896*. Engraved by Devambez. The bill of fare includes a chicken dish named for Bernhardt’s favorite playwright, Victorien Sardou, and a dessert named for her leading role in his melodrama *Tosca*. Georges Goulet is a brand of champagne.
The commercial exploitation of the theater-kitchen nexus was ratcheted up a notch in William A. Brady’s 1912 production of *Bought and Paid For*. Brady’s press department issued a booklet, “Fanny Blaine Gilley’s Recipes,” offering sample meals for a couple living on a salary of $14 a week, as the play’s hero does (the recipes were ostensibly provided by Helen Lackaye, who played the role of Fanny in the Chicago company). Fictional characters living within the bounds of a prosenium arch between eight and eleven every night were now giving lessons in domestic economy to actual wage slaves.

That same year, Broadway offered its masterpiece of gastronomic verismo when David Belasco’s *The Governor’s Lady* (1912) sent the aroma of fresh buckwheat cakes and coffee into the stalls from a perfect replica of a Childs’ Restaurant. This was praised as “the last word in stage realism,” “its multitudinous detail” worthy of a Zola. What the audience saw and smelled was a validation of its own experience; the stage frame may have focused their attention on details they had hitherto overlooked, but in essence it was the familiarity they appreciated. To quote *Theatre Magazine*:

Childs’ is essentially an American institution, and even more than American is it essentially of New York. There is no genre picture of New York life, or that of Philadelphia, or a half dozen other cities, to be painted without a Childs’ restaurant occupying its proper place in the perspective: a Childs’ with its geometrically arranged assortments of provender, its burnished coffee boilers, its neat, white-aproned “Ham-an” waiters, and, most significant and characteristic of all else, its motley gathering of hungry and hasty patrons... 

The replication endows a commonplace of the urban landscape with monument status. By taking the public inside as observers, without the obligation to be customers, Belasco was doubling their pleasure, offering them a position of privilege and investing the overlooked quotidian with semiotic significance.

A reaction was brewing. It was only logical that, after calling for the theater to be replaced by an avant-garde version of music hall and circus, Filippo Marinetti would launch an attack on traditional cooking. His *Futurist Cookbook* of 1932 was, in the words of a recent commentator, “designed to wrench food out of the nineteenth-century ‘bourgeois’ past and bring it into the dynamic, technological, urban twentieth century.” It banned *pastasciutta* from the Italian table, along with knives and forks, and called for originality in every aspect of the gastronomic experience. The various dinners Marinetti describes closely resemble the scenarios for the Theatre of Surprise he had concocted before the First World War. Diners are to have their legs pinched under the table while eating, and waiters are to stagger about clumsily with full soup tureens, creating anxiety over the fate of a long-awaited first course. Eating, like theater, was to be an unsettling and unpredictable experience for the consumer.

In this, as in so much else, the protosurrealist Alfred Jarry had made the preemptive bid. A year before the premiere of *Cyrano* with its lavish array of comestibles, his anarchistic farce *Ubu Roi* opened at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre and launched a frontal assault on the middle-class dinner party. At a banquet prepared for his co-conspirators, the monstrous Père Ubu consumes the veal and chicken before the guests arrive, leaving them only a nauseating assortment of (in my translation) “Spitten-Polish soup, runt chops...dog burgers, pope’s nose of turkey, Russian surprise...Jerusalem heart jokes [and] cauliflower au shitton.” As the pièce de résistance, Père Ubu flings a lavatory brush on the table; a few guests partake of it and expire at once.

In typical fashion, then, the audience of establishment theater is treated to sensory blandishments: simulacra of fine dining, appetizing food, and even its preparation abet lavish costumes, magnificent scenery, and the opulent décor of the auditorium to swaddle the spectator in an atmosphere of luxury. By definition, the antiestablishment theater must adopt an adversarial stance, challenging the public. Even at its inception, its audience is confronted with the injunction, literal in this case, “Eat shit and die.”

**Notes**

9. The name was bestowed by “Q” (Thomas Purnell), the reviewer for the Atheneaum.


19. Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, La cuisine italienne, 238–239. As early as 1769, the play Arlequin restaurateur aux Porcherons included a scene “centered on the then-novel activity of reading a menu.” Spang, Invention of the Restaurant, 182.

20. Gustave Claudin, Mes souvenirs. Les Boulevards de 1840–1870 (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1884), 310 et seq. The tax complained that there was no foie gras on the menu. J.R. Pitte, Gastronomie française, 140.


22. Spang, Invention of the Restaurant, 176.

23. The earliest examples I have found are the Potage à la Dumas and Potage Thérésa in Ferdinand Grandi’s Les Nouveautés de la gastronomie princière (1866). What is suggestive is that Thérésa was a star of the music halls and opera, not opera, and that her popularity with a middle-class public won her this honor.


27. Ibid.


30. “Staging a Popular Restaurant,” Theatre, October 1912, 204, x–xi. That same year British reviewers referred to the “scent of the breakfast over the footlights” in The Younger Generation at the Haymarket Theatre. Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News, 7 December 1912, 624. Less pleased were audience members at H.V. Esmond’s The Wilderness (St James’ Theatre) who wrote to the manager George Alexander that “the smell from the haddock was unbearable.” Eva Moore, Exits and Entrances (New York, 1928), 54.
