Alexis Soyer’s Gastronomic Symposium of All Nations

May 1, 1851, London invited the world to visit the Industrial Exhibition of All Nations. This huge exhibition, the first in a series of international expositions and fairs, brought together a somewhat disjointed collection of industrial innovations, raw materials, and arts and crafts from all over the world. Large numbers of visitors of all classes from Britain and abroad were expected to attend. Novelist and future prime minister Benjamin Disraeli wrote to his friend Lady Londonderry, “You may rely upon it, as a fact...that the ministers are really alarmed about the concourse of foreigners to the Exhibition, & that the Socialists have been making, & are making, extensive arrangements for our regeneration, apropos of that gathering. The affair has been the subject of cabinet councils.”

The press was less concerned about potential socialist unrest than about where and how all these visitors would be fed, a genuine concern since London had a paucity of respectable and high-quality public dining establishments. But visionary chef Alexis Soyer believed he had a solution: he would create an enormous dining establishment, Soyer’s Gastronomic Symposium of All Nations.

London lagged behind Paris in terms of public dining. Rebecca Spang has argued that by the mid-nineteenth century, French restaurants provided important public spaces that allowed Parisians to explore and display “new possibilities for, and anxieties about, social interaction.” Parisian restaurants shared a fairly standard type of decoration, including mirrored walls that both allowed for the easy observation of other patrons and provided sparkling patterns of light. The restaurant distinguished itself from other dining establishments with a standard menu, service at any time, and the presence of female visitors. Taken together, these properties created an ideal forum for the evolution of modern culture toward social interaction centered on consumption and pleasure.

By contrast, respectable families in London tended to eat at home; if no domestic table was available, gentlemen dined at their clubs. Less respectable men might partake of a simple meal at a chophouse or public house, or have toast and bacon at a coffeehouse. Street vendors supplied inexpensive precooked meals for the working classes—baked potato carts, fruit sellers, and pie and cake vendors were legion on London’s streets. Taverns prepared entrees of varying quality for those who wished to dine in their lodgings. Apart from the most elegant men’s clubs, the overall quality of meals available to the public was low. Even establishments that served decent food were often dirty and uncomfortable.

Into this void stepped Alexis Soyer, a French immigrant who became one of nineteenth-century Britain’s best-known chefs. A visionary in the world of food, Soyer had a passion for social justice in addition to his taste for fine dining. Upon his arrival in London in 1831, he immediately went to work to elevate English cuisine. Like most excellent chefs of the time, he cooked for the aristocracy, first for the Duke of Cambridge and later for the Marquis of Alisa. He then became the first chef of the Reform, a leading political and social club, which rapidly took its place as one of the finest places to dine in London. But Soyer was not content to feed only wealthy and powerful men. His invention of a mobile soup kitchen made him a popular hero in Ireland during the famine. Closer to home, he raised money for soup kitchens to relieve the Spitalfields silk weavers, who were starving as a result of lower tariffs on French imports. He also authored popular household management books and wrote letters to the Times advising middle- and working-class cooks. His Modern Housewife (1848) was framed as a series of letters between two middle-class wives who provided each other with menus, recipes, and advice. Recipes and advice for working-class wives could be found in his Shilling Cookery for the People (1854). Soyer also lent his name to several early mass-market foods. Soyer’s Sauces could be purchased in bottles, and a sparkling beverage known as Soyer’s Nectar was widely advertised.

After Soyer left the Reform Club in 1850, he was still called upon to cook for visiting dignitaries from around the world. He upheld his reputation as a premier chef by creating massive public banquets that featured both elaborate...
menus and decorative schemes. Hundreds of aristocrats and public officials dined on fantastical dishes that were often modeled after important events in the lives of the guests. For instance, at a banquet hosted by the director of Her Majesty's Theatre in honor of two visiting French playwrights, Soyer re-created the shipwreck scene from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. The meal he created for Lord Palmerston and Admiral Sir Charles Napier in honor of the Egyptian ruler Ibrahim Pascha included realistic portraits of Ibrahim and his father, Mehemet Ali, painted in sugar. At a banquet for the Lord Mayor of York, attended by two thousand guests, including the Prince Consort, a single dish of turtle, rare birds, and noix from over one hundred fowl cost over £100 in raw ingredients. Ever concerned with economy, Soyer explained that he never would have devised the dish had he not been able to use up the rest of the animals elsewhere.

Soyer's creativity was not limited to food. He was also fascinated by the possibilities of new industrial technology. In 1841 he had perfected a modern and efficient kitchen that was an enduring attraction of the Reform Club (under Soyer, the Reform kitchen had been the first in England to install all gas appliances). Soyer also gained some fame with his "Magic Stove," a small portable cooking apparatus suitable for picnicking or camping, and he marketed gas appliances, carving scissors, kitchen timers, and various saucepans and serving dishes, as well as portable stoves that were used by the British army until at least World War II.

During the planning stages of the Great Exhibition, much public argument and discussion ensued about the catering arrangements inside the Crystal Palace, the giant glass conservatory that would house the Exhibition. Proposals ran from light and simple fare to more elaborate dining, perhaps featuring international cuisine. The popular satirical periodical *Punch* was especially concerned with this aspect of the Exhibition's planning. A piece entitled "Too Many Cooks!" expressed concern that the foods of all nations would mix in distasteful ways. But in a typical *Punch* reversal, another piece, "Refreshments at the Great Exhibition of 1851," warned the presumption "the whole world will be satisfied with tea and bread and butter" was missing the mark and asked "the food of all nations" be admitted to the Exhibition.

The planners approached Soyer as a possible contractor for refreshments. But when he learned of the many restrictions the committee placed on food consumption inside the Hall, he declined to continue discussions. He was especially troubled wine could not be served and diners would not be able to sit down. Wanting nevertheless to be involved in the Exhibition, Soyer devised the Gastronomic Symposium of All Nations. It would be both a rival and a
companion to the Crystal Palace, and typical Soyer: fantastic, fanciful, and delicious, a treat for all the senses, not merely the palate. He designed the restaurant on a grand scale, with capacity for over two thousand diners. Soyer felt sure his reputation as a chef, his aristocratic connections, and his talent for promotion would make his vision a reality and his restaurant a success.

Soyer set to work. He discovered Gore House, recently the home of the Lady Blessington and the Count d’Orsay, was available. Lady Blessington and Count d’Orsay had made Gore House a center of London intellectual and artistic life; they held a very fashionable salon there until bankruptcy forced them to flee to the Continent. Gore House was adjacent to the Crystal Palace, and its ample interior space and extensive gardens seemed perfect for Soyer’s needs. He threw himself into preparations, hiring an army of gardeners to completely redo the grounds and culling exotic plants from the hothouses and gardens of his aristocratic patrons. He engaged one hundred young pages and dressed them in magnificent livery he personally designed. He brought in the same firm that had built the Crystal Palace to erect an enormous glass banquet hall. He also created two large kitchens—one indoors and one out—using the latest cooking technology and his own efficient designs. The showpiece of the kitchens was a new gas-fired roasting apparatus: indoors, six hundred joints a day could be roasted without using a single lump of coal. A large outdoor version of the gas roaster could roast an entire ox every day. Guests could monitor the restaurant’s use of gas by checking the giant meter that ran the length of the building.14

Inside the restaurant Soyer installed dazzling gas lighting, heightening the effect with silvered glass fixtures, a recent invention. George Augustus Sala, Soyer’s assistant at the time, reported that these fixtures, manufactured by the Patent Glass-Silvering Company of London, were more beautiful than Bohemian or Venetian glass and had been singled out for admiration by the Prince Consort when he dined at the Symposium as the guest of the Lord Mayor of York.15 Each of the restaurant’s fourteen indoor rooms had a different theme associated with a particular region or culture. The walls of the Chinese-style room were decorated with Confucian teachings in Chinese characters; visitors received brochures that translated the Chinese into several European languages. Another room was decorated in the style of an Italian veranda, with murals of the Italian landscape and wax grapes and vines festooning the latticework above the visitors’ heads. Yet another room featured arctic landscapes complete with stuffed arctic foxes and crystal and mirrors to give the illusion of endless space and cold. There was even a bedchamber decorated with lacy gold and black zigzag wallpaper and a bedspread of silver and blue satin and lace.

In keeping with the fantastic and international theme of the Symposium, Soyer created an American bar that served a long list of cocktails, which were still a novelty in Britain.
Another bar, located in the gardens, was done up like an ice cave. Visitors could rent umbrellas to avoid being drenched by the mists that enveloped the entrance to the cave. Inside, various colored liqueurs streamed endlessly from a goblet held by a statue of Hebe, and goldfish swam in the glass ceiling above visitors’ heads. An enormous outdoor table on an Italian-style veranda, the Banqueting Bridge or Doge’s Terrace, was available for Europeans who favored al fresco dining. All of these rooms could accommodate dinner parties. Like the displays in the Great Exhibition nearby, the decor of the Symposium could be simultaneously educational and exotic, as in the Chinese room. But what were visitors to make of the idea of dining in a boudoir?

Spectacle and pleasure were the focus of much of the Symposium’s decorative scheme; education, the elevation of culinary taste, and the glorification of technological progress were important secondary themes. Considered in this light, Soyer’s Symposium represented a microcosm of Britain’s uneasy movement toward modernity. Furthermore, Soyer and his Symposium stood at the nexus of several modern, even postmodern, trends in advertising, technology, and mass entertainment. In terms of marketing and advertising, Soyer was a Victorian showman who used the techniques of the future. To lure customers to his Symposium, he showcased technological innovations, both serious improvements in kitchen equipment and new processes that created special effects. These innovations included lighting, as in the Shower of Gems, a room with a perforated ceiling, a floor-to-ceiling mirror, and suspended silvered glass globes that turned the gaslight into a shower of multicolored, gemlike tears melting down the walls. The Gallic Pavilion comprised a hallway featuring the national tricolor in zig-zag pattern on the walls, along with cupids, flowers, and tenting. According to Sala, “the effect of the whole apartment, with its narrowing perspective and lines of colour blending into each other, forms a species of zig-zag kaleidoscope, very curious and beautiful to behold.” Sala warned that at night, when the Pavilion was illuminated, it “acquires so much warmth as to become positively dangerous to young and inexperienced hearts.”

Soyer appealed to visitors from all classes and nations with low-priced menus, theme rooms, and amusements ranging from fortune telling to dancing to hot-air balloon rides. To advertise his venture, Soyer used product placement strategies and made his “Soyer” branded products available for purchase by patrons. Soyer’s Symposium was both a tribute to the Great Exhibition and a pastiche of it, a Disney Epcot Center for its time. Like Epcot, the Symposium appealed to the masses by providing a mixture of technology, illusion, and entertainment. And as with the Disney parks, some visitors loved the illusion while others were appalled at Soyer’s poor taste.

Since at least the eighteenth century, provincial Britons had flocked to “scientific spectacles” put on by itinerant showmen. In London burlesque and pantomime theater had increasingly come to rely on fancy scene shifts and transformations requiring pyrotechnics and special effects. The Crystal Palace, itself an example of innovative architecture, was a warehouse of new inventions and processes. With his Symposium, Alexis Soyer intended to offer attractions to equal or even surpass anything his visitors had ever seen before. By placing technology at the center of his dining establishment, Soyer fulfilled several goals. On the one hand, he brought useful technology to the attention of his customers, especially the use of gas appliances and efficient kitchen tools and designs. On the other hand, as Christine Blondel remarks in her study of French scientist and showman Claude Bernard, “experiments, apart from providing scientific facts, were also for illusion, excitement and pleasure. Using modern inventions, he [Bernard] dramatized not only the potential of modern technology, but also the power of his personality.”

The same is true of Soyer, who clearly had illusion, excitement, and pleasure in mind, perhaps even more than the dissemination of useful scientific and technical knowledge.

Soyer’s emphasis on providing pleasure and amusement was problematic to some. The Symposium was open to all, rich and poor alike. While some of its attractions had a serious and useful side, the Symposium was by no means the enlightening educational experience the planners of the Great Exhibition hoped the Crystal Palace would offer the common man. Employers who gave their workers time off or even financial incentives to visit the Exhibition expected their employees to spend their time learning things that would improve their skills. In the elevating and carefully policed atmosphere of the Crystal Palace, the social classes could mix (at least to the extent they occupied the same building), but what might happen when they rubbed elbows in one of Soyer’s many bars or had their fortunes read in his Gipsy Encampment? Many feared the Exhibition, taking place as it did only three years after the last major Chartist gathering in London, would become the site of a working-class revolt. Of course, this did not happen within the Exhibition itself, and neither did the Symposium host any rioting workers. But fears about the working classes played an important role in determining the ultimate fate of the Symposium.

If Soyer was not primarily interested in promoting scientific and technical knowledge, why then did he place such emphasis on the technological spectacles available at
the Symposium? The fact is technology played a crucial role in his marketing scheme for the restaurant, often serving as the focal point for print ads designed to lure customers. By twentieth-century standards, mid-Victorian advertising was quite unsophisticated. Print ads tended to be small: a typical Victorian strategy was a few lines in the corner of a newspaper giving the name of a shop and describing the types of goods on sale. Advertisements for restaurants tended to follow the same pattern. A menu and price list, with some information about whether women were served, usually sufficed for the midcentury restaurateur.

Several factors influenced the small size of these ads, including the advertisement duty (repealed in 1855), the stamp tax (repealed in 1855), and the paper duty (abolished in 1860). Midcentury advertisers tried other, less expensive means of promotion, such as placards posted on walls. By 1839 posters were common enough to pose a concern for the London metropolitan police, yet it is difficult to say how successful they were since as soon as the paste was dry they were frequently covered over by other ads. Sandwich board carriers and large-scale ads carried on carts that jammed the streets of London received much negative public comment.

Instead of relying on these standard methods, Soyer advertised his restaurant in a variety of novel ways: letters and stories in the newspapers, handbills dropped from dirigibles, banquetts for the press, illustrations in comic pamphlets, even a walking tour of the Symposium in book form. His methods were so successful other firms began to build their own advertising schemes around references to the Symposium. For instance, John Rose and Company Teas ran an ad in poetic form urging Soyer to serve their brand of high-quality tea. Several firms mentioned their products could be seen at Soyer’s Symposium; one ad for the Patent Glass-Silvering Company listed the Symposium among the “three sights of London.”

At the Symposium itself, Soyer hosted several large public banquets and a number of smaller luncheons for fashionable members of society, which were usually written up in the press. The Observer, for instance, reported that “Gore House, indeed, is a spectacle in itself, and on a fete day its embellishments are worthy of international contemplation. Science and art are seen side by side. Cookery by gas is exhibited here, miraculous table-cloths there, grottos and fairies, statuary and fountains, baronial halls, halls of all nations, medievalisms, and the novelties of 1851, mingle in an agreeable confusion, at once startling to the eye, and suggestive to the mind.”

Always on the lookout for a good Soyer story, Punch claimed the otherwise extensive press coverage had left out Soyer’s best remark of the press banquet evening:

“Why,” asked M. Soyer, “why is this dinner the opposite of an omelette soufflé?”

Everybody gave it up.

“Because,” said the cook, “an omelette soufflé is puffed to be eaten: now the dinner is to be puffed.”

Punch did not have the last laugh here, however, since this satire provided free advertising for Soyer.

Soyer also tried other more attention-grabbing methods of advertising. Since hot-air balloon ascents were still a novelty, he planned a promotional ascent from the Symposium grounds. The idea was for the balloon, carrying his assistant, George Augustus Sala, and two aeronauts, to drop advertising leaflets for the Symposium from the air. Unfortunately, something went wrong with the balloon’s rigging, and Sala and company fell for nearly a mile before one of the aeronauts could slow their descent. The balloon crashed in the midst of a market garden full of angry and astonished workers. Even though the execution was faulty, the ascent drew a good deal of attention, thereby accomplishing Soyer’s goal.

These varied advertising methods, combined with the attractions of the Symposium and the high caliber of its food, assured the restaurant’s success. As many as one thousand visitors of many classes and nations made their way there every day. Some arranged for private meals or group banquets in the evening after visiting the Exhibition. Some no doubt skipped the Exhibition and just visited the Symposium. In less than six months, the Symposium took in £21,000. If we estimate five hundred visitors came to the Symposium six days a week for six months, a figure that accords well with £21,000 at 2s per visitor, then seventy-two thousand people visited the Symposium.

The Symposium’s eclectic mix of styles, its use of flashy technology to produce special effects, and Soyer’s open invitation to visitors of all classes elicited delight and revulsion in equal measure. The Symposium guidebook described Gore House as a phoenix arising from the ashes of the Blessington bankruptcy, proclaiming: “Its halls once more glitter with technology to produce special effects, and Soyer’s open invitation to visitors of all classes elicited delight and revulsion in equal measure. The Symposium guidebook described Gore House as a phoenix arising from the ashes of the Blessington bankruptcy, proclaiming: “Its halls once more glitter with light, and its chambers re-echo with the voices of the noble and the talented; when all former glories are called into new, and even more glorious life, by the enchanter’s wand of Alexis Soyer.” Future prime minister Benjamin Disraeli agreed, writing, “The most wonderful thing in the world is Soyer’s Symposium, which he has made out of Gore House and its gardens—poor Lady Blessington’s former abode.” A dandy himself, Disraeli was so impressed he presented Soyer with lines from one of his novels printed on a piece of silk cloth. Even the Exhibition planners visited the Symposium when the banquet honoring the executive committee was held there.
But not everyone was enchanted, for reasons hinted at in the guidebook’s next proclamation: “From all quarters of the globe, civilised or uncivilised, will his visitors come—the doors of the Symposium will be thrown open to universal humanity.” It was precisely this opening of the Symposium to all comers that caused alarm. Some critics also disagreed with the first proposition—that the remaking of Gore House had restored the place to its previous beauty and fame. Not surprisingly, *Punch* pointed out the bad taste of the decorations:

Soyer, the praise thy skill deserves
Is perfectly immense,
For nice discernment in the nerves
Of gustatory sense.
But now Gore House hath been by thee
So glaringly defaced,
However good thy palate be,
We must dispute thy taste.40

Above: Washerwomen. From *Punch*, vol. xx, 1851. Reproduced with the permission of Punch, Ltd.

The elegant retreat of the bright and fashionable had become a resort for the masses. *Punch* made this transformation even more explicit when it satirized Soyer’s restaurant as “a grand Baked Potato Can of all Nations, or Eel Pie and Kidney Pudding Symposium.” In this piece, each aspect of Soyer’s Symposium was sent up and made ridiculous by associating it with notorious working-class neighborhoods and meals. Soyer’s grand banquets for the rich and famous were rendered as “Monster Luncheons al fresco, or Baked Potato Matinees.” *Punch* made fun of another of the Symposium’s wonders, a huge three-hundred-and-fifty-foot-long tablecloth Soyer was having made in Liverpool by Jeffrey, Morrish, and Company, claiming it was large enough to “cover the whole of Seven Dials [a terrible slum], where the first Matinee will probably take place.” A cartoon showing an endless line of washerwomen working on the cloth and another of two American Indians in tribal
dress purchasing a baked potato added to the mockery.  

This satire points to two important anxieties connected with the Symposium (and the Exhibition as well): the mixing of classes and the mixing of nations. Beyond making fun of the tackiness of Soyer’s remodeling, Punch also worried about the sorts of visitors the Symposium would attract.

Nevertheless, Soyer encouraged everyone to visit the Symposium, and his commitment to welcoming a very wide clientele did not stop with the variety of the surroundings or the food. The one-shilling admission price was applied to any food purchased. Soyer offered dinners from as little as two shillings for “anglo-french fare” and six shillings for table d’hôte seatings to higher-priced private and public feasts for the rich and powerful.  He welcomed his guests with this epigram above the door: “Say how many you are, and at what cost you wish to dine; you need say nothing more, your dinner is settled.” Soyer could be trusted to create the perfect menu, and he always attempted to give value for the money.

Given the large scale and complexity of the enterprise, Soyer needed help in overseeing the preparations. George Augustus Sala, a young artist, amateur chef, and aspiring writer, fit the bill perfectly. Sala had first come to Soyer’s attention through the pamphlets he wrote and illustrated about the Great Exhibition. Even though Soyer’s plans for the decoration and promotion of the Symposium were over the top even by Sala’s bohemian standards, Sala agreed to become Soyer’s assistant, resident artist, and advertising copy writer. His assignment included creating one of the artistic centerpieces of the Symposium’s interior, a mural stretching across the main staircase that illustrated famous men and women from around the globe—running, climbing, and riding on various exotic and imaginary animals. Years later, Sala claimed that the mural was in very poor taste and that he had been upset when Soyer insisted he describe it in detail in his Symposium guide. Especially odious, in Sala’s recollection, was the title Soyer gave to the work, “The Grand Macedoine of All Nations: being a Demisemimitragicompanodicosmpolytolyofanofunniosymposiorama, or Suchagettingupstairstothegreatexhibition of 1851.” Be that as it may, none other than Disraeli was flattered by his inclusion in the mural, writing enthusiastically to his sister that the object of the mission of this starry sylphide was to “astonish and delight the world.”

The mural may have been central to Soyer’s decorative plan for the Symposium, but Sala’s other duties were more important to the ultimate success of the venture. He wrote the small illustrated book that was distributed to guests so they could take a self-guided tour of the Symposium’s wonders. Sala took the visitor through each room and around the grounds, supplying the sort of chatty descriptions of the spaces and their contents that would later serve him well in his capacity as the first special correspondent for the Daily Telegraph. This illustrated guide provides the only full and detailed description of the premises. Sala vividly describes the entrance to the Symposium:

You have passed through one of the massive and lion-guarded portals of the Symposium, ascended a flight of steps, and, entering a lofty vestibule, experience what you are probably prepared for, but not in such a form—a “thundering reception” from M. Soyer. Immediately above your head, looming in the glittering indistinctness of blue and silver, is a hand—a monster hand, no doubt appertaining to the spouse of the ox-eyed Juno, clutching the arrows of Jove—sinuous wreaths of bright forked, snaky lightning, which, escaping from the clenched palms of this thundering old fellow, are dispersed over the ceiling and walls of the vestibule (painted a bright cerulean blue), darting into the corners, rushing hither and thither, dazzling the eye, and astounding the spectator… Nor should surprise end here. Above the inner portal, directly facing the visitor, are the words “Soyer’s Symposium”—household words to every lover of good cheer—depicted in flashes of lightning, and forming a specimen of meteoric typography very curious to behold. Near the ceiling, too, on the opposite wall, is a pretty fresco, representing “La fille de l’orage” (a choreographic creation, by the way, of M. Soyer) in the very act of “riding on the whirlwind and directing the storm”, with wings of electric fire. The poetical mind might picture to itself that the object of the mission of this starry sylphide was to assuage the storm, to intercede with her tempestuous sire, and stay the furies of his hand; for on her marble brow rises in full refulgence the star of peace—the harbinger, we hope, of that nascent fraternity of all nations which the Great Exhibition of 1851 will give birth to.

Much of the guide is devoted to descriptions of the technological wonders of the place; it even lists the addresses of the manufacturers and designers. At the back is a series of highly enthusiastic notices about the Symposium from newspapers across the country. Soyer defrayed some of his publishing costs with a few pages of advertisements for London merchants, an insurance company, and a private sporting establishment where visitors could watch boxing and fencing matches and other feats of strength and skill. Ads for Soyer’s Relish, Soyer’s Magic Stove, and one of his cookbooks, The Modern Housewife, were also included.

The one significant part of the restaurant Sala fails to describe in detail is the food. Rather than include a menu, as restaurant advertisements of the time usually did, Sala simply states that all manner of comestibles were available to please almost any international visitor—“baked young woman” or “cold boiled missionary” for a hungry New
Zealand tribesman being the only exception. Perhaps Soyer’s reputation as a chef was so firmly established that such details were unnecessary, and besides, food was only one of the attractions. Like Sala, visitors tended to remark on the appearance of the place more than on the food, a tendency also common in guidebooks to Parisian restaurants, where diners came as much to see and be seen as to experience a fine meal.

Some sense of the food served at the Symposium can, however, be gleaned from the many notices that appeared in the London press. On May 15, the day before the Symposium opened to the public, an advertisement in the Daily News claimed, “The choicest wines from vineyards of high repute may be obtained at moderate prices.”

Another announcement in the Daily News advertised four Table d’Hôte seatings per day at 6s. 6d, including waiters, and “Dinners Anglo-Française” in the Baronial Hall from two to half-past eight for 3s. 6d. These dinners included hot joints, pastry, creams, and jellies. Luncheons and cold dinners could be had for 2s. Ales, sandwiches, wines, ices, coffee, and cigars could be found at the Gipsy Encampment and the Picnic Tents, and after two in the afternoon, the price of admission was applied toward the purchase of food and drink. The only specific food to draw the attention of the press was the huge cattle that were roasted outdoors every day. The process began at ten in the morning, and the meat was ready to serve at five. This especially flashy and novel meal became a favorite of Soyer’s for provisioning large banquets and attracting crowds to the Symposium. For the Queen’s birthday on May 21, 1851, Soyer roasted a bullock weighing 140 stone that had been selected by a famous cattle judge. Roast beef was quintessentially British, after all, and its service at the Queen’s birthday celebration was accompanied by fireworks and a performance of the Band of the Second Life Guards, evidence Soyer was trying to represent Britain at its best to international and local visitors alike.

Even before his official appointment as Soyer’s assistant and decorator, Sala had written about Soyer and the Symposium in his three panoramic pamphlets about the Exhibition. The first of these, The Great Exhibition Wot Is To Be (1851), had attracted Soyer to Sala in the first place. In it, Soyer appears at the head of the French delegation in a portrait titled “French Cookery.” He stands with a pan in each of his outstretched hands, his large floppy hat worn characteristically à la Zoug-Zoug—cocked sideways on his head. He is flanked by two of his cookbooks, The Gastronomic Regenerator and The Modern Housewife. The caption reads: “Why, oh why, did he resign?” referring to Soyer’s recent departure from the kitchens of the Reform Club.

In his second comic panorama, The Great Glass House Open’d; The Exhibition Wot Is! (1851), Sala pictured the peoples of all nations vying for admission to Soyer’s Symposium. Sala’s rendering of the Symposium makes it look exactly like the Crystal Palace. Punch was fond of pretending this was a common mistake; novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, writing to Punch in the guise of a patriotic French visitor, M. Gobemouche, mistakenly ends up inside Soyer’s Symposium when he asks to be let off at the Exhibition. (Thackeray was able to describe the Symposium accurately because he was Soyer’s friend and a customer.) Perhaps Sala’s cartoon guests were moving toward the largest dining area, dubbed the “Encampment of All Nations,” which could accommodate 1,500 people at one table. Or perhaps his illustration represents the Symposium’s Baronial Banqueting Hall rather than Gore House. Built by the firm of Fox and Henderson, the Hall was one hundred feet long, fifty feet wide, and thirty feet high; it could seat four to five hundred people at a time. The Hall resembled a castle on the outside and had one enormous room inside. Its ceiling was made of stained glass; live musicians played somewhere above the visitors’ heads. Sala reported a novel system of ventilation was used to keep the room cool. If this system was as successful as Sala claimed and actually did cool the Hall, it was a technologically significant improvement that would have been welcomed by the overheated visitors to the Crystal Palace.

The Great Glasshouse Open’d; The Exhibition Wot Is! closed with another series of references to the Symposium. Near the end of the panorama, the World, represented as a male figure with a globe for his head, prepares to go home. But before he leaves, Britannia invites him to dinner at the Symposium. The World and Britannia are shown relaxing after their meal, smoking and drinking wine, while the royal lion sleeps at Britannia’s feet. In the final plate, all nations gather at a bar that serves the usual native drinks—mare’s milk, mint juleps, and, of course, Soyer’s Nectar. Here Sala graphically represented the Symposium’s cultural role: to display the best of British food and industry and at the same time to provide a space in which foreign visitors would feel comfortable. In this way the Symposium was central to the greater project of the Exhibition.

In Sala’s final panoramic pamphlet, The House that Paxton Built (1851), he again included multiple references to Soyer and the Symposium. Soyer is pictured in a floppy chef’s hat, presenting several of the appliances and dishes he invented. A banner above his head proclaims the “Symposium Gastronomicum of All Nations” at which “the renowned Soyer [is] exhibiting his magic stove, with which he pledges...
himself to prepare dinner for all the visitors to the Exhibition, and even the hippopotamus himself, appetite and all.”

Soyer had grand plans for his Symposium. He wanted to open “a national school of scientific but economical domestic cookery” as soon as the establishment was secure in its popularity.\(^5^7\) He planned to bring in women of all classes to learn household management, sewing, washing, and cookery along with other accomplishments typical of each student’s position in society.\(^5^8\) But in October 1851, after a mere five months, the Symposium’s doors closed.

In the end, the Symposium failed for a variety of reasons. Soyer’s most recent biographer cites his extravagance and poor management as the main causes of the restaurant’s failure.\(^5^9\) Yet finances do not tell the whole story. Soyer’s plan for an on-site cooking school and his intended collaboration with the famous conductor M. Jullien might well have rescued the project; certainly the public had not lost interest in the kind of entertainment the Symposium offered (nearly a decade later Londoners would be dancing, dining, and even watching balloon ascents under silvered gaslight at the Cremourne pleasure garden).\(^6^0\) Unfortunately for the Symposium, on the night chosen for a visit by the magistrate in charge of renewing its liquor and entertainment license, the presence of two hundred noisy provincial “agriculturists” along with several hundred other raucous visitors on the grounds of the restaurant sealed the Symposium’s fate. The magistrate called the Symposium “a receptacle of the commonest description.”\(^6^1\) Although this judgment alone might not have spelled the end for the Symposium, the neighborhood of Kensington sealed the restaurant’s fate. Residents of this quiet and affluent suburb had opposed the Exhibition itself on the grounds it would bring too many people of all sorts into their midst.\(^6^2\) Soyer’s plans to expand the festive offerings of the Symposium to include music and dancing on a regular basis could not have been popular with the neighborhood. This local opposition, combined with the real possibility of losing the liquor and entertainment license, presented a formidable obstacle to the Symposium’s continued existence. Always touchy about his reputation, and therefore furious at the inspector’s report, Soyer precipitously closed the restaurant’s doors. His creditors sensed a bust-up and called in their debts. Soyer was able to pay them all, but the Symposium was through.\(^6^3\)

Although finance and poor management were partly to blame, Soyer’s Symposium closed because those in authority at both the national and the local levels were ultimately too distrustful of the working class, urban or rural. Despite the relatively sophisticated and wide-ranging promotion of the Symposium and Soyer’s honest attempts to provide both amusement and value to all classes, in 1851 there was still too little trust of the masses to allow such a venture to flourish. Indeed, when the time came for another Exhibition in 1862, catering arrangements would not be left to an outside entrepreneur like Soyer. Instead, the second Exhibition’s catering firm set up “first and second-class restaurants and buffets, where everything excisable could be purchased without let or hindrance.”\(^6^4\) This plan may be read as proof of a growing sense of trust between the classes—after all, liquor would now be allowed inside the Exhibition—yet it is worth pointing out that keeping dining and drinking inside the Exhibition was also a means of control. However festive and spectacular the second Exhibition may have been, it is unlikely visitors had as much fun dining at one of its buffets as they would have had dancing, drinking, and eating in Soyer’s Symposium. An enduring entrepreneurial venture with such an extensive mix of science, spectacle, and entertainment, relentlessly marketed in every possible venue, would have to wait for full realization by future promoters and visionaries.\(^6^5\)

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 67.
7. Ray, *Alexis Soyer*, 17–29. Sugar painting was a process whereby portraits were painted on rice paper, which was then placed on a gel made of sugar. The paper dissolved, leaving behind the portrait, effectively painted in sugar.
8. The mix is usually referred to as the “oyster,” a small round piece of meat next to the backbone.
10. Although Soyer’s name was associated with the stove, and he spent much time and energy on its promotion, he actually borrowed the idea from a French visitor, Chevalier Lemoff. After making improvements, Soyer had the stoves manufactured by a London firm, though he made no money since the manufacturers soon claimed to have made improvements of their own and patented the invention. Ibid., 100–101.
12. Ibid., 73.
15. Ibid., 42.
16. Ibid., 73.
17. Soyer was always attentive to cross-marketing possibilities; Soyer’s Magic Stove was on display in the gypsy encampment on the grounds and could be purchased in a shop in the Symposium.


22. Ibid., 150–151.

23. Chartism was a working-class movement named for the People’s Charter, a petition demanding political and economic rights for the working classes that was repeatedly submitted to parliament. In the 1840s many feared this movement would launch a revolution, as Chartists staged large protests and gatherings.

24. London at dinner, where to dine in 1851: A facsimile reprint (Devon, UK: David & Charles Reprints, 1983).


26. Ibid., 56.

27. Ibid., 57–59.


32. By 1854 the Cremourne was resorting to balloon ascents in which a woman dressed as Juno astride a bull was dangled from the basket. See Linda Nead, Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 115.

33. George Augustus Sala, The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala, 1, 246.

34. Ray, Alexis Soyer, 120.

35. Ibid., 120–121.

36. Ibid., 123.


40. Punch xx, 1851, 233.

41. Ibid., 199.

42. Sala, The Book of The Symposium, 59.

43. The magnificent tablecloth later provided a chance for more free publicity of the sort familiar to us today—the Times reported the theft of a large section of the cloth, bemoaning the loss of this triumph of “British Industry.” The idea that thieves could successfully steal a large portion of the cloth, given the numbers of pages, cooks, and gardeners constantly roaming the premises, is hard to believe. Regardless, Soyer managed to garner another news story about his Symposium in the national papers. See the London Times, 8 July 1851.

44. Sala, The Book of The Symposium, cover insert.

45. Ray, Alexis Soyer, 119. Ray reports the epigram was a translation from the Roman satirist Martial.


47. Disraeli, Letters, 426.


50. Spang, Invention of the Restaurant, 198.


52. Daily News, 6 July 1851.


54. Ray, Alexis Soyer, 118.


56. Sala, The Book of The Symposium, 55.


60. Nead, Victorian Babylon, ch. 4.

61. Ray, Alexis Soyer, 123.


63. Ibid.

64. Sala, Life, 1376.