Masters of Disguise
French Cooks Between Art and Nature, 1651–1793

From the winged hare presented at Trimalchio’s dinner to the four-and-twenty blackbird pie of English nursery-rhyme fame, we delight in food that is not what it appears to be. In the year 800 Charlemagne’s cooks skinned a peacock to preserve the beautiful plumage, then spiced, larded, and roasted the naked bird. The skin was placed over the cooked carcass, the feathery tail fanned out, and a little flaming cotton ball placed in its mouth as it was brought into the banquet hall. Flaming peacocks and swans regularly graced royal tables throughout the Middle Ages. In our own day, the turducken—in which a boneless turkey encases a boneless duck that encases a boneless chicken—represents the latest instantiation of culinary artifice that aims to momentarily fool, and lastingly delight, its audience. Other examples abound, notably in the realm of sweats and desserts, such as the bûche de Noël, marzipan fruits, wedding cakes, and sugar sculptures. Artifice has been an enduring ideal of elite European cuisine from the ancient world to the present day.

However, the emergence of classical aesthetics in the mid-seventeenth century privileged the natural over the spectacularly artificial. What happened to cooks and their work as they lost this central gauge of their skill? This essay traces the changing place of artifice as an ideal in culinary aesthetics and practice through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cookbooks and medical treatises published in France. The period begins with the publication of François La Varenne’s Le cuisinier français in 1651, which opened a new era in French culinary treatises after over a century of silence. We conclude with the radical phase of the French Revolution, which disrupted cookbook publication, indeed most arenas of commerce, for several decades. It was during this grand siècle that the classical standard of French cuisine developed.

Long one of the leading aesthetic principles of elite culinary production, artifice had propagated a series of technical innovations—including methods to debone meat and fish, prepare stuffing, carve vegetables, and work sugar—that defined skill among French cooks during this period. However, culinary artifice also posed profound concerns for diners, who feared they might mistakenly ingest inedible or taboo materials due to the cook’s convincing disguises. Over these two centuries, as an ideology of the natural slowly gained ground in aesthetic philosophy, those same highly prized skills of disguise grew increasingly suspect. Culinary art was to be shunned in favor of a more “natural cuisine.”

Of course, it proved extremely difficult to identify what qualified as “natural cuisine.” Did any form of human intervention render food unnatural? By the eighteenth century, two oppositional definitions of natural cuisine developed, with very different implications for the organization of culinary labor. On the one hand, natural cuisine could indicate local ingredients and simple preparations, dispensing with the need for a master cook with years of training. Uneducated servants might be the best “natural” cooks, in fact. This interpretation posed serious threats to the cadre of experienced male cooks who worked in the homes of France’s nobility. Throughout this period, French elites dramatically downsized their household staffs, substituting one or two female cooks for a battalion of male kitchen officers. Economic considerations thus may have played some role in driving the turn to a more natural cuisine.

On the other hand, natural cuisine could require a rigorous study of nature’s laws, thus mandating even greater training of cooks in new theories of chemistry and physiology. Cooks occupied a realm between physician and nurse, providing the daily sustenance best suited to an individual’s health. This latter definition promised to elevate the cook’s professional status on a number of registers. By positing a universal foundation for taste in natural law, natural cuisine envisioned the cook’s liberation from diners’ whims and so theorized a relationship in which the cook dictated standards of taste to consumers, rather than the other way around. The authority that today’s celebrity chefs claim over “good taste” might be traced back to this latter definition of a natural cuisine, and the skills required to create it.
Disguise and Delicacy

Seventeenth-century cooks recognized artifice as one gauge of professional skill and excellence. The title page of the 1674 publication of L.S.R.’s L’art de bien traiter (The Art of Hosting Well) trumpeted that the text would “show the true science of properly preparing, disguising and serving all kinds of meats and fish.” Here, the verb “to disguise” (déguiser) referred to the use of marinades, sauces, and garnishes in providing meat or fish with flavor. The Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française (Dictionary of the French Academy) published in 1694 made clear that the terms *guise* and *déguiser* had culinary connotations beyond the kitchen. *En guise* meant “in the manner of” and suggests a substitution or element of artifice. By way of example the dictionary noted the practice of “frying frogs *en guise de chicken.*** Similarly, *disguise* included any actions to create a dish considered more appetizing and more refined than its raw counterpart. Although specific techniques varied by the decade as French elites’ tastes changed, cooks and diners alike embraced the term *disguise* to refer to a wide range of culinary preparations.

Certainly, social critics employed the term *disguise* to critique luxury, extravagance, and deception in objects of consumption. The satirical *Isle des Hermaphrodites* (Island of Hermaphrodites), published around 1600, couched a critique of life at Henri iii’s court within a distopian travel narrative. Appearances were deceiving in this land of inversions, particularly when it came to food. The narrator marveled that “all the dishes had to be disguised, so that no one would recognize their nature.” Fruit was not eaten unless transformed by sugar and butter pastry into jams or baked goods. Table linens also represented objects not themselves: a damask tablecloth became a rippling river, napkins represented fanned fishes’ fins, and the author lamented that “nothing pleases these people, no matter how good it may be in itself, if it is not disguised.”

Mattia Giegher’s 1639 publication, *Li Tre Trattati* (The Three Treatises), demonstrated multiple methods for folding napkins into various animal shapes, giving us a sense of the real-life reference for the critique (see illustration on p.38).

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cooks engaged in a multitude of games in which one food masqueraded as another. Such games often played along the fault lines of alimentary taboos, as the cooked...
imitated the raw, the dead masqueraded as the living, and the injunctions of Catholic fasts were followed to the letter, if not the spirit, of the law. Religious fast days provided opportunities to display prowess with culinary disguises such as “meat” made from fish, or “fish” molded from vegetables. François La Varenne included a recipe for “ham” made from a salmon farce in his influential *Le cuisinier françois*. Le cuisinier royal et bourgeois (The Royal and Bourgeois Cook), first published in 1691 and attributed to the royal cook Massialot, offered instructions for an entire meal of root vegetables, as had been served on Holy Friday, 1690, to Monsieur le Duc d’Orléans. Onions, turnips, and parsnips were sautéed in butter and mashed into a farce. The cook then added parsley, chives, fine herbs, truffles, mushrooms, more butter, and a little bread and cream. The creative cook would use this farce to sculpt different white fish, each presented on their appropriate platters. Carrots and beets could be prepared similarly to imitate pink-fleshed fish, such as salmon or trout. The author recommended using a little butter combined with breadcrumbs and sprinkled over the top of the “fish” to give them flavor and texture as they baked.

Although butter and eggs were technically proscribed during Lent and on fast days, Massialot approached this rule as a matter of personal taste rather than as absolute law. He recommended creams and omelettes as suitable side dishes for the Lenten table and observed that “for those who eat butter, many root vegetables can be prepared with a white or a red sauce.” He took great care to specify suitable presentations for his farcical “fish”: “To disguise them, have all sorts of sauces (ragoûts); use chopped mushrooms from some, truffles for others, asparagus tips for others, morel mushrooms for others; have a good Robert sauce as well as a white sauce made without anchovies; this will serve principally to dress the platters of this so-called Fish made with the Farce.” The sauces were the crucial elements of this disguise, so closely associated with particular fish that they completed the masquerade in the same way that a dress and an apron turned a man into a woman. In cuisine and theater alike, the term “farce” (from the verb *farcir*, to stuff) came to indicate that things were not what they appeared to be.

*Below:* Whimsically folded napkins from Mattia Gieger, *Li Tre Trattati* (Padua, 1639).
For elaborate banquets, cooked animals were dressed to resemble the living, such as swans presented in feathered plumage or pastry molded to depict fowl (see illustrations on pp.40, 43). These games of artifice exhibited the extreme of the ideal of culinary delicacy, following L.S.R.’s definition of delicacy as those techniques that “comprise the fine and exquisite manner of preparing meat.”22 A cook demonstrated delicacy through culinary skills that valorized artifice. The ideal of delicacy attained institutional import within the legal definition of the cooks’ trade when the caterers renewed their statutes in 1645. The first article observed, “The Experience that the Officials and Master Cook-Caterers have acquired in the organization of their Banquets for satisfying the most delicate tastes is recognized as so reliable, that they retain possession of the ancient Privileges with which the beloved departed King Henri the Great honored them.”23 The guild sought to equate membership with quality preparations and presentation, encoded in the term delicacy.

Disguise was the term used to refer to preparations that transformed leftovers into a new dish. The cook’s job required using the leftover foods resulting from diners’ desire for abundance in new preparations to satisfy their desire for novelty. A recipe from François Marin’s 1742 Les dons de Comus (The Gifts of Comus [the Roman god of feasting]) observed that in case a chicken fricassee went uneaten, “to disguise it, dip each piece in beaten eggs, then bread it with fine white breadcrumbs, & fry it until golden.”24 Disguise signified a cook’s skill, taste, and economy, as well as the cook’s structural role in insulating consumers from the base origins of their meals. The labor force that assumed these behind-the-scenes duties valued the ability to effectively maintain the curtain between preparation and consumption, proclaiming it to be among their central skills.

The celebration of disguise represents what literary theorist Erica Harth has termed a “precious” aesthetic, in which “the value of representation came to consist in the ‘artifice’ or skillful manner of its imitation.” She contrasts this to the classical aesthetic that “prescribed the depiction of things according to ‘nature’ for it centered on the general or the universal.”25 These two ideals remained in dynamic tension throughout the seventeenth century.26 Landscape design, visual arts, and music all registered this aesthetic dialectic, as did the table.27 However, it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that aesthetic philosophies resolutely proclaimed the ascendancy of the natural over the artificial. This shift had tremendous consequences for the quotidian arts of cooking, decorating households, and gardening, and for the people who made their living practicing these arts.

Over the second half of the eighteenth century, use of the term disguise became increasingly problematic within cookbooks and as a gauge of culinary skill. The trouble seems to begin with the cooks who proclaimed a nouvelle cuisine, a modern cuisine, in the 1750s and 1740s. These cooks substituted meat broths and reductions for rich, fat-based sauces to dress the dishes of elite tables. They also sought to eliminate the rhetoric of disguise from their texts. In Les dons de Comus Marin defined modern cuisine as a science that “consists of decomposing, making digestible and quintessencing meats, to pull their nourishing and light juices.”28 He referenced contemporary physicians’ texts and emphasized the important connection between natural cuisine and health.

However, this transition away from artifice was not immediate. Disguise continued to connote culinary expertise throughout French society. In the 1746 introduction to La cuisinière bourgeoise, the culinary bestseller of the eighteenth century, Menon noted that a requirement of a good cook included knowledge of different meats, “and that she know how to disguise them in several manners.”29 By the 1793 edition, the editor substituted the verb apprêter (to prepare) for disguise. Indeed, this later edition of the classic text promised to liberate female cooks and their masters from the “embarrassing multiplicity of refined seasonings and industrious disguises that require both skill from the cook and opulence from their masters.”30 Forsaking disguise, the female cook required little skill and less money to produce natural cuisine. Simultaneously, elite male cooks and cookbook authors sought to lay claim to the aesthetic ideal of the natural by redefining culinary skill in terms of natural laws, scientific knowledge, and the public good. This contested definition of the natural as either simple or scientific proved powerful in reorganizing culinary labor along gendered lines in nineteenth-century France.

Natural Flavors and Harmonies

In 1719 the abbé Dubos issued a clarion call for artistic obedience to the natural with the proclamation, “Artisans born with genius do not take their predecessors’ works as their models, but Nature itself.”31 However, the ideal of the natural articulated within Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy posed a paradox for human art and industry. On the one hand, this ideal rendered artifice ethically suspect, linked to luxury, excess, and corruption. Rousseau’s discussion of feminine beauty is perhaps the best-known condemnation of artifice, encompassing makeup, fashionable clothing, and jewelry.32 On the other hand, this ideal
Le Pastissier François.

À Amsterdam,
Chez Louys et Daniel Elzevier. A. 1655.
The prominence of the natural as an ideal within classical and Enlightenment aesthetic philosophies transformed the meaning of *disguise* in cuisine and undermined the cook’s pride in artifice for the sake of his noble patron’s delicacy. *Disguise* became the key term invoked to condemn complicated, expensive cuisine that compelled diners to eat to excess, promoting ill health. In Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, the quintessential Enlightenment compendium of all human knowledge, the Chevalier de Jaucourt criticized Trimalchio’s cook and similar culinary sleights of hand as examples of “that deceitful art” in his article on “Cuisine.”34 The term *disguise* fanned fears about the cook’s capacity for culinary deception, substituting meat for fish, for example. But what *natural* food looked like remained a matter of debate. For some authors it was simply a matter of employing fewer sauces, for others it required reduced consumption of expensive imported foods, while for still others it was an incredibly expensive and time-consuming affair based on heavily distilled meat broths and reductions. Finally, for many, natural cuisine fundamentally questioned the validity of the cook’s job in general.

L.S.R., author of *L’art de bien traiter*, had used the term *natural* to refer to the biological imperative of hunger, from which he extrapolated taste as a secondary imperative. He explained that his text provided only two manners of preparing and serving foods, one appropriate for the most elite ceremonies and the other appropriate for less formal occasions, because “Nature gave good taste and discerning organs indiscriminately to all men, & in the desire and inclination to eat, the poorest man finds in sole and pheasant the same pleasure, & the same delicacy that the wealthiest epicure tastes; they both have this natural penchant to temper the ardor of thirst, & appease their hunger with all those things destined to sustain life.”35 It was the drive to consume itself that was natural, and shared by all humans. This ethic of the equality of taste provided a foundation for universal aesthetic standards. The abbé Dubos also assumed that alimentary taste was a baseline of an aesthetic naturalness. He wrote, “[a] sense within us determines if a Cook has operated according to the rules of his art. We taste the ragoût, and even without knowing these rules, we know if it is good.”36 Similar rules applied to the judgment of poetry or painting, based on the artist’s success in representing the natural.

In the early eighteenth century, following nature meant that cookbooks organized meals in a format that followed the four seasons, rather than arranging the text by feast and fast days (*gras* and *maigre*), as had been common throughout the seventeenth century.37 A debate on the role of meat in the human diet increasingly opposed Catholic religious laws of abstinence to scientific, *natural* laws of ideal foods for human consumption. In this opposition, religious law ceded to natural laws, symbolized by the right physicians won in the late seventeenth century to administer dispensations from the observance of Lent or Catholic fast days.38

In the *nouvelle cuisine* of the 1730s and 1740s, natural cuisine meant aiding and, to a certain extent, taking over the digestive function.39 Cook and author François Marin noted, “What is the role of the Cook if not to remove natural viscosity from essences or enveloping particles, by heating, baths, extracts, to make these pass into the blood with less trouble? if not to aid through mixing gentle or active essences, as necessary, the digestive faculties of the stomach.”40 This era emphasized the role of meat bouillons and reductions in cuisine, following the prescription of these preparations for a wide range of ailments.41 These juices and saps preserved the essence of meat’s restorative qualities without requiring the energy expenditure to masticate flesh.42

By the 1750s following Nature meant integrating medical and chemical analyses of food and cooking into cookbooks, providing information on the properties and qualities of food.43 Key points of this debate focused on the effects of sauces and composed dishes, the impact of imported products and the related impact of out-of-season products, and the properties of ordinary kitchen utensils from the new perspectives afforded by chemical analysis. The introduction to Menon’s *Les soupers de la cour* (*Court Suppers*), in the voice of the culinary tradesman, observed, “If cooks have examined and studied the nature of Flavors, their differences which are often difficult to appreciate, the

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Left: *Title-page woodcut from François Pierre de la Varenne’s Le Pastissier Français* (Amsterdam, 1655).
result of their mixture; if they know better the qualities of diverse essences and salts which they use, their hand guided by prudence will set doses with more precision, will form wiser and happier combinations, and will throw into preparations more harmony and delicacy. Health and taste will both be satisfied."44 Nature could be studied and submitted to the cook’s desires in creating a meal to suit his master’s palate and constitution.

The menus of royal and aristocratic dinners indicate that grand artifices fell from favor during the second half of the eighteenth century. Great stuffed and feathered fowl no longer graced the royal table; instead, typical elite dishes included roast suckling pig, leg of lamb or mutton, roasted rabbit or turkey presented with a simple herbed wine and butter sauce. In Menon’s Les soupers de la cour the most spectacular presentation included the use of a pumpkin to present a pumpkin soup.45 Of course, culinary deceits did not disappear altogether. The office took over where the cuisine had left off, creating monumental decorative structures of pastry or sugar.46 While these elaborate representations of well-known architectural scenes displayed kitchen workers’ skills and a master’s wealth, they did not attempt to fool the eye as had the prior century’s great centerpieces. Court feasts celebrated the natural by taking dining parties into the gardens for collations, which operated as a series of roving hors d’oeuvres with multiple dining areas, supported by a host of cooks and servants. Outside of these grand court affairs, eighteenth-century elites’ preferences turned toward smaller, intimate suppers that demanded ever more variety and technical skill.47 Natural cuisine was anything but simple.

Moreover, games of substitution never left the French canon entirely. Pigeons à la crapaudine (toadlike squab) remained a very popular preparation for squab both on elite tables and in the urban marketplace.48 The squab was cut in half above the legs and cracked at the back so that the squab breast formed the frog’s “face,” with the “legs” extending behind. This preparation played with religious dietary laws, disguising meat for meager fare, for although squab was banned on fast days, frogs as water-dwellers were consumable. This appealing presentation has endured to the present day, a classic of traditional French cuisine, and beautifully illustrated in Jacques Pépin’s Complete Techniques (see page 46).

Alongside the scientific definition of the natural existed a geographic understanding of what was natural in foods, with implications for political economy and government. Both Montesquieu and Rousseau both attributed innate physical and moral properties to climates, produce, and peoples and cautioned against transplantation.49 By contrast, cookbooks tended to celebrate the moral and physical transformations that were newly available as a result of long-distance trade in exotic foods. In 1750 the introduction to Menon’s La science du maître d’hôtel-cuisinier (The Science of the Butler-Cook) observed that the influx of foods from southern countries—sugar, coffee, spices—into the North gave northerners “a vigor and delicacy unknown to their ancestors, who in their simplicity contented themselves with the products of the earth that witnessed their birth.”50 The consumption of exotic or out-of-season foods had operated as a sign of luxury throughout the late seventeenth century. By reframing this type of consumption as a product of human curiosity and ingenuity, cooking entered the realm of the natural arts.

Cookbook prefaces launched a defense against the learned disparagement of the culinary trades. Authors asked their readers to consider that if a cook had the power to cause illness, could he not wield also that skill in favor of health? These texts defended the culinary art as producing food that was more delicate and more natural than that eaten a generation ago. The 1758 publication of La cuisine et office de santé (Health’s Kitchen and Pantry), also attributed to the prolific Menon, made education in health food a marketing point. The approbation accorded this text noted, “The author of this Work is to be commended for according with the perspective of Medicine, which has always objected to the excessive abuse of spices, & against the custom of preparing food in an overly complicated manner.”51 The text proposed some key alterations of culinary practice, in accordance with contemporary medical treatises. For example, it orders the use of a glazed clay pot for the fabrication of stock, replacing the ubiquitous copper kettle that physicians and savants of the day warned might inadvertently poison diners through accumulated verdigris.52

Practicing Natural Cuisine

As cookbook authors sought to follow Nature and prescribed laws of the natural, they attempted to mitigate the arbitrary and whimsical character of taste to which the cook was subject. In 1742 the author of Les dons de Comus observed, “Cuisine is perhaps of all arts the most arbitrary, one head cannot contain all tastes, all ideas and all methods. But cuisine has principles like the other arts, and if everyone can cook to their taste, few know how to do it perfectly to others’ taste, and many of those who are mixed up in cooking are held to the trivial maxim: That a Cook is always good when he knows how to please his Master.”53 The tension of aesthetic philosophy resided in the recognition of the validity of
In La science du maître d'hôtel-cuisinier Menon noted this aesthetic tension when he chastised his noble readers, “You want preparations that Art condemns…Less depraved, wiser, you should give a capable Artist the liberty to follow different tastes alongside the impulse to establish universal standards for judgment. Art depended on reception to be justified, while the natural claimed to accord with general laws. Development of a natural cuisine sought to resolve this tension, by simultaneously explicitly outlining the standards and veiling the process of standard-setting. However, the tension continued to pervade master-servant relations, as well as the politics of public dining.
the rules of his Art. Nature which guides him in his work, when he knows to consult her, gives herself to his desires: a judicious and enlightened combination of natural flavors, you would be offered a dish as healthy as it is agreeable.”

In this bid for the recognition of universal, natural laws that guide the culinary arts, the author admitted that the individual tastes of masters or clients might not follow or appreciate these laws. Denigrating their tastes as depraved, he nonetheless recognized the degree to which cooks were bound to serve that variety. The solution was to educate both producers and consumers to the natural laws of taste, thus freeing cooks from catering to individual whim.

The natural aesthetic increasingly undermined the original tenets of culinary skills as distancing the diner from the base, common, and ordinary. Natural cuisine praised simplicity and transparency in alimentary preparations. The condemnation of cooks’ artifice was strongest in medical doctor Jourdan-Lecointe’s Cuisine de santé (Health’s Kitchen), published in 1790. In a lengthy autobiographical preface, the author explained that he had suffered ill health throughout childhood and had undertaken the study of cuisine under a good cook in order to alter his diet and restore his health. This book was the result of those years of experimentation. Jourdan-Lecointe lamented that present society had abandoned the task of cooking to an ignorant, often illiterate class of manual laborers. “Is it not danger to abandon care of our precious existence to people who are often lacking either principles or real talents, whose only test is tasting for an agreeable taste, lacking knowledge of whether something they used was capable of destroying health? Must we renounce the delicious pleasures of nature, because the cook’s art transforms them into poisons?”

Jourdan-Lecointe assured his readers that his text would illuminate nature’s path, and following its instructions they could partake of simple and healthful properties.

The ideal of a scientific cuisine suited to human nature provided the logic in the argument presented by the Parisian caterers in opposition to the dissolution of their guild in 1776, when the king’s finance minister, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, abolished all guilds save those considered essential for public safety, such as the goldsmiths, the pharmacists, and the wigmakers. First, through the explicit comparison of cooking to pharmacy, the lawyer for the caterers’ guild emphasized the training and skill necessary to create food suitable for human nature. “This art of cooking is just as essential as that of Pharmacy to the life of man... The human body is a hydraulic machine, composed of solids and fluids. The Cook must know how to season his dishes so they do not cause disorder in the machine, and so they maintain the equilibrium of fluids or secretions.”

Cookbooks, medical texts, and guides for home economy that often combined elements of these two genres make clear the centrality of consumption in the maintenance and repair of the human machine. Doctors built reputations on diet consultation, while their patients actively monitored the effects of dietary changes.

Second, the defense of the guilds emphasized the necessity of strict surveillance of cooking utensils and method. The guild’s lawyer asserted that “[t]he Caterers’ Guild officials have always inspected all of the Kitchen Staffs (Corps de bouche), to assure that Kitchen utensils are kept in good repair, to avoid verd-de-gris, which can form from the acids used in the composition of dishes: only the people of this trade, experienced through long practice, can perceive these pernicious risks to the health and even the lives of their fellow Citizens. Since the Officials began this inspection, no sinister event has occurred, and the Public owes thanks to their wise administration.”

New theories of chemistry and new methods of chemical analysis had turned the public’s eye to the dangers that surrounded them in common household goods, daily nourishment, even the air they breathed.

One of the major casualties in this chemical paranoia was copper—long the prized metal for cooking because it could be pounded very thin and very evenly while maintaining its strength and integrity. Copper was also among the more expensive metals from which cookware was forged. Copper pans were generally lined in tin so as not to communicate the distinctive taste of copper to foods cooked within and to protect diners from the metal’s adverse reaction to acidic foods. Copper cookware was ubiquitous among the Parisian public cooks. However, from the 1740s, the caterers’ guild regularly inspected the state of the public cooks’ copper cookware, looking for signs of wear on the tin lining. If highly acidic foods such as tomatoes or vinegar were cooked in copper cookware in which the copper was showing through the tin lining, there was a small chance that verdigris, recognized as a poison in this new chemical analysis, would result. Should verdigris occur, it would affect the food and perhaps even make the consumer violently ill. The caterers’ guild articulated the need to defend public health through their inspections of the cookware belonging to their own guild members as well as to other public cooks.

By late summer of 1776 the guilds had been restored after several months of civil unrest. The French state set upon a policy of uniting the guilds that overlapped, regardless of ancient enmities and rivalries. In 1782 the caterers...
of Lyon asked the king to reconsider the uniting of their guild with that of the other food, drink, and hospitality trades, explaining the fundamental difference of their trade from others: “The science of a perfect and intelligent cook consists uniquely in the knowledge of ingredients’ properties, in their preparation, and in his own and his utensils’ cleanliness; this science is always acquired through the constant exercise for a determined period of time, under expert and honest masters, and delicate consumers.” The caterers’ petition appealed to a cultural recognition of the centrality of food to medical discourse and emphasized the importance of the cook’s trade to public health.

The culinary profession mediated between art and nature, shielding the elite employers from involvement in the transformation of the raw to the cooked. Yet the cult of the natural increasingly rendered this mediation suspect. On the one hand, elite discourse about Nature became increasingly technical, subject to scientific laws beyond the intelligence of the humble class of cooks. The culinary trades could counter this logic through expanding scientific education and terminology. On the other hand, Nature could be instinctual and transparent, as long as education had not corrupted the cook. This logic supported the increased reliance on female cooks throughout French society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Naturally Good Taste?

By the end of the eighteenth century female servants had come to dominate the service population for a number of reasons. Sarah Maza reminds us that “[u]p to the middle of the eighteenth century, one-third to one-half of the servant population in most towns was male. By the 1790s eight or nine servants out of ten were female, a proportion that was to remain constant throughout most of the nineteenth century.” Cissie Fairchilds explicitly linked this phenomenon to the “bourgeoisification” of culinary service, noting that Toulouse’s capitation roll of 1695 listed seventy cooks, of which two were women, while the 1789 roll listed 225 cooks, 173 of whom were women. More households employed servants, but the number of servants per household had declined. Fairchilds connected this shift in the gender ratio of the servant population to the parallel transformation of French cuisine, as extensive banquets gave way to intimate soupers.

Fairchilds’s theory accepts at face value the identification of “natural” cuisine with simpler preparations and women’s labor, which we know elite male cooks vigorously contested, thereby replicating stereotypes that held women’s culinary talents to be innate, while men’s skills were learned formally. In fact, as the sixty-two editions of Menon’s La cuisinière bourgeoise (The Urban Female Cook) demonstrate, there was very little that was “natural” about women’s culinary knowledge. Women seeking employment as cooks might advertise few skills beyond their good morals, or they might itemize specific culinary and household management skills. As a result, by the middle of the eighteenth century it was clear that female cooks, too, often required instruction in the most basic elements of culinary production, including the proper way to supervise a pot-au-feu or to pluck a chicken.

Menon’s introduction to La cuisinière bourgeoise assured his readers that careful perusal of his text would result in the formation of this ideal female cook. He had written explicit instructions on the assumption that his audience had a limited acquaintance with the culinary techniques and vocabulary that circulated in the education of male cooks in both guild commerce and elite kitchens. This assumption framed the content of the text. As he explained, “I have presented simple, good and new dishes, for which I provide intelligible explanation and strive to be comprehended even by those without knowledge.” Those who sought more complete theoretical explanations (une science plus étendue) were advised to consult the earlier Nouveau traité de la cuisine (New Treatise on Cuisine), available from the same bookseller.

The preface to the 1748 edition of La cuisinière bourgeoise indicated that despite the author’s intentions many people found the instructions of the first edition to be either too short or coded to be useful to those outside of the trade. The author claimed to have taken this response into account in the new edition of the text. He explained,

[s]ubmitting to the Opinion of several People who found certain Articles too abridged to be easily understood by those with only a glancing acquaintance with Cuisine, in this Edition I provide them with more complete and instructive detail. In addition to a number of stews (ragoûts) practiced in Bourgeois homes, with which I have enriched the text, I added a short Treatise on the Art of dissecting Meats, and Advice on the benefits of and how to choose Meat.

An example of Menon’s attempt at more complete explanation is found in the section on poultry. Where the 1746 edition simply ordered that a chicken be plucked and the carcass emptied before specifying different preparations, the 1748 edition outlined steps to be taken for this introductory procedure. The feathers should be plucked as soon as the chicken is killed, which eliminated the common
technique of soaking the bird in hot water to loosen the feathers, which, the author assured his audience, ruined the meat's taste. Plucked, the chicken should be passed over a flame, taking care not to burn it, to remove any remaining feathers. Entrails were to be carefully removed through an incision made at the back of the neck, while preserving the carcass's shape. The pedagogical challenge articulated within the pages of *La cuisinière bourgeoise* centered on the difficulty of representing practical experience in language. Even this elementary manual initially exceeded the capacities of its audience. In the education of new ranks of servants, cookbooks explicitly positioned themselves as the required texts that would communicate the new aesthetic standards of the natural from diners to cooks, as well as the results of new scientific knowledge regarding foods, culinary tools, and techniques.

Conclusion

In *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (*Paradox of the Actor*) Denis Diderot observed that all great actors, poets and “imitators of nature, whatever they are, endowed with a rich imagination,
great judgment, fine tact, and very certain taste, are the least sensitive beings.” The best actors are not those who actually have felt the sentiments that they represent, but those who had best studied sentiments that they did not feel. Others might see a paradox in a renowned romantic lead who had never known love, but Diderot asked whether this distance from Nature was necessary for objective analysis. Similarly, texts on the culinary art from the 1750s to the 1770s presented the elite cook as a man who studied Nature in order to submit it to his aims, which he gauged through fine, delicate taste and a sure hand. He need not consume hormone treatments, or preservatives in our food supply.

Musical arts, now justified the long training periods and even greater education and a more careful application of close surveillance of public cooks. The emphasis on the natural ideal within culinary discourse, highlighting simplicity, purity, and honesty of flavors and connected to healthfulness in medical and chemical estimations, was the basis for public cooks’ defenses of their legal privileges and guilds. The difficulty of creating this “simple” cuisine, directly parallel to the organizing paradox of the natural within the visual and musical arts, now justified the long training periods and close surveillance of public cooks.

Although this logic did not convince the authorities to accord the culinary trades any special treatment—the culinary guilds were dissolved in 1776, and diverse food, drink, and hospitality guilds were brought together in amalgamated guilds in 1777—it did form the basis for discourse on these principles within the profession. The skill of disguise ceded to the skill of imitating Nature, which required even greater education and a more careful application of scientific principles. Conceptualized as the human digestive process, as matching humoral requirements with diet or avoiding the multiplying list of suspected poisons, natural cuisine was anything but simple.

Contemporary culinary discussions accentuate the enduring dichotomy between artifice and nature. We contrast the virtues of “natural” food, be it organic, local, or slow, to the hidden dangers of genetic modifications, hormone treatments, or preservatives in our food supply. Today’s “Buy Local” campaigns, the booming business in organic produce, the Slow Food movement, and opposition to genetically engineered food reveal the lasting impact of this eighteenth-century aesthetic debate, which trumpeted Nature’s triumph over Artifice. Then, as now, we would benefit from a more concerted excavation of the word “natural” and a more rigorous interrogation of the actual ideals and practices that change in response to this aesthetic and moral imperative.

NOTES
1. Petronius, The Satyricon (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986). See chapters 26 to 78. Trimalchio displayed his new wealth through extravagant dinner showcasing astonishing culinary creations, including the aforementioned winged hare, a roasted wild boar surrounded by “[l]ittle piglets made of cake” and stuffed with live birds, and a roast pig that was “guttered” at the table by the cook to reveal sausages and blood puddings within. Petronius’s account of this fictional dinner has become an emblematic critique of the luxury and decadence associated with ancient imperial Rome. Giovanni de Rosell’s Epitaph or The Italian Banquet (1598 English ed.) includes a recipe “To Make Pie That the Birds May Be Alive in Them, and Fly Out When It Is Cut Up,” which is presumed to be the model for the nursery rhyme.
3. Louisiana chef Paul Prudhomme claims to have invented this preparation, which is in keeping with time-honored French technique. See www.chefpaul.com.
4. Stephen Mennell, in All Mannen of Food (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995 [1985]), recognized the century from 1660 to 1760 as one of tremendous change in French cuisine, as elite tastes moved from a medieval paradigm characterized by exotic spices, the mixture of sweet and sour, and an abundance of meats to a classical paradigm characterized by domestic herbs, the separation of sugar from sour or salt, and rigorous constraints placed on both the amount and types of meat served on elite tables. This transition was slow, uneven, and never complete, as the cranberry sauce next to the turkey on Thanksgiving tables all over America illustrates. I contend that French cooks’ turn away from artifice as an aesthetic ideal toward the natural participated in this broader transition.
6. This transition is ably articulated by Jean-Louis Flandrin’s essay “De la diététique à la gastronomie, ou la liberation de la gourmandise,” in Histoire de l’alimentation, Flandrin and Montanari, eds. (Paris: Fayard, 1996). In contrast to Flandrin, who characterized this period as a straightforward transition to a more natural aesthetic ideal, I contend that artifice remained important well into the eighteenth century, with the transition moving much more slowly and unevenly than we have thought.
8. Examples of such fears abound, from the cook who can trick his master into eating shoe leather thanks to exceptional sauces, to one who substitutes urban cats or dogs for more exotic “game.” These rumors circulate more during periods of rapid social transition and conflict and remind us of the power cooks have over their diners. Mary Douglas’s classic work, Purity and Danger (London: Routledge, 1966), informed my thinking on the relationships between cooks and diners, food, and artifice.
10. Stephen Mennell notes the dramatic turn away from imported spices in elite cuisine during this period, hypothesizing that broader access to these spices diminished their value as distinguishing luxuries. See All Mannen of Food, p. 73.
12. This extended a long-standing conflation of culinary and medical skills, while emphasizing new skills of literacy to remain abreast of the rapid transformations of knowledge in chemistry, physiology, and anatomy. On the medical professions.


14. I urge my readers to note that the rhetoric of “natural” cuisine encompassed the elaborate collations enjoyed by the court throughout the grounds of Versailles (considered “natural” because they were consumed outside) as well as the cup of milk enjoyed by a milkmaid after her labors. Remember that Rousseau’s celebration of Nature resulted in both his own ascetic withdrawal from society and Marie Antoinette’s elaborate Hameau, where the Queen and her attendants could indulge in a life close to nature, supported by a vast staff who did the real celebration of Nature resulted in both his own ascetic withdrawal from society and Marie Antoinette’s elaborate Hameau, where the Queen and her attendants could indulge in a life close to nature, supported by a vast staff who did the real work of farming. See Mary Sherrill’s analysis of the complexities of a natural aesthetic in “The Portrait of the Queen,” in The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Natural cuisine might demand more utensils, ingredients, expense, and education for cooks, but it could dictate the opposite on all counts, as well. Rather than valorizing one over the other as “more natural,” I contend that the term’s significance resides in its breadth and claim to universality.


16. Thomas Artus, sieur d’Audry, Description de l’Ile des Herminobrides (Cologne, 1742), as cited in Wheaton, Savoring the Past, 53.

17. Wheaton, 53.


20. Ibid., 58.


26. Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present, trans. Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [French ed. 1996]), 25. Jean-Louis Flandrin observed: “In France changes in dietary preferences appear to have gone hand in hand with changes in literary and artistic tastes. In the seventeenth century, for example, when fat-based sauces replaced spicy sauces, proponents of the ‘new cuisine’ were food of arguing that the modern sauces were more respectful of the natural taste of ingredients. This argument obviously has much in common with the cult of the natural in French art and literature of the classic period. Resisting this phenomenon in culinary publications. Physicians responded by emphatically distancing their profession from that of cooks. See the discussion of this point in Rebecca Spang’s The Invention of the Restaurant, 25–29.


30. Menon, La cuisinière bourgeoise (Bruxelles: François Foppens, 1753).


34. “cet art trompeur” in the entry on “Cuisine,” L’Encyclopédie.


36. Dubos, Reflexions critiques, 341.

37. Menon, Le nouveau traité de la Cuisine, avec de nouveaux dessins de table et vingt-quatre menus, où l’on apprend ce que l’on doit servir suivant chaque saison, en gras, en maigre, & en Pâtisserie. 2 vols. (Paris: Chez Michel Etienne David, 1759). This claim is also made in Le nouveau cuisinier roial et bourgeois, 2 vols. (Paris, 1752, 1774). Vincent de la Chapelle’s Le cuisinier moderne (The Hague, 1755, 4 vols.) (1745, 5 vols.) (The Modern Cook, 2 vols., London, 1733) condemns these attempts, observing that as seasons vary greatly from place to place and year to year, it is useless to make general predictions of food availability.


39. The cookbook authors who heralded this “new cuisine” had an obvious financial incentive to disparage all previous compendiums in favor of their own work. We might remain skeptical of how new this cuisine really was. Vincent La Chapelle’s Le cuisinier moderne (1755, pub. in English in 1753) plagiarized a great deal from François Massialot’s Le cuisinier roial et bourgeois (1691), as Philip and Mary Hyman document in their article “Le Chapelle and Massialot: An Eighteenth-Century Feud,” Petits Propos Culinaires 2 (1979): 44–45. However, there were some real innovations in the new cuisine. These texts tended to be physically larger than their predecessors, illustrated, and composed of multiple volumes. They advocated preparing sauces using distillations and reductions of meat stock in place of the fat-based sauces of the prior century. Most important, authors within this genre emphasized their own experience and skills as the basis for their authority, rather than their aristocratic patrons’ tastes.

40. Marin, Les dous de Comus, xviii.

41. Vincent La Chapelle’s Le cuisinier moderne (Amsterdam, 1755), first published in English (1753), provides a marvelous discussion of medicinal bouillons and restaurants.

42. The notion that cuisine supported health was far from new, but nouvelle cuisine’s incorporation of specific medico-scientific references certainly was a new phenomenon in culinary publications. Physicians responded by emphatically distancing their profession from that of cooks. See the discussion of this point in Rebecca Spang’s The Invention of the Restaurant, 25–29.

43. Menon plagiarized liberally from Lenery’s Dictionnaire des aliments, first published in 1709.


45. Ibid.

46. Marvelous examples abound in Joseph Gilliers’ Le cannemeliste français (Nancy, 1751).


48. This preparation is found regularly in the account books and through the policing of urban Paris cooks in the eighteenth century. Archives Nationales, 174457 (1755). See Louis xviii’s Relation d’un voyage à Bruxelles et à Coblenz (Leipzig, 1823). During the future king’s flight from revolutionary France, he was offered pigeons à la crapaudine at an inn along the way. This account is also available in the following English translation: Louis xviii, “Narrative of a Journey to Bruxelles and Coblenz,” in John Wilson Coker’s Royal Memoirs on the French Revolution (London: John Murray, 1823), 158.


51. Merson, La cuisine et office de santé (Paris: Guillyn, 1758).

52. Warnings about the hazards of copper cooking utensils became common throughout the 1740s, influencing culinary practice and leading to the policing of the urban marketplace. These warnings were also noted in cookbooks, as I explore in Chapter Three of my manuscript, “Gens de Bouche: French Cooks in the Age of Enlightenment.”


54. Merson, La science, xii.


61. “AN, 1/12758. Supplication from Pâtissiers-Traiteurs to the King, 1 January 1782.

62. On the feminization of service see Maza, Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France, 277–278.

63. Fairchild, Domestic Enemies.


65. Sixty-two editions were published between 1746 and 1799, that is, at least one each year, resulting in an estimated 93,000 copies in circulation. Philip and Mary Hyman, “Imprimer la cuisine.”

66. La cuisinière bourgeoise (Paris: Guillyn, 1746), iv.

67. La cuisinière bourgeoise (Paris: Guillyn, 1748).