Culinary Nationalism

Culinary nationalism is an old story. For the West, France supplies the most striking example of a “culinary country,” one where cuisine and nation are seen to coincide. But, how does culinary nationalism work? I suggest recipes as primary indicators of identity. To be sure, cookbooks and their recipes point toward practice. Yet, as we all know, recipes reach beyond practice to a vision of good food and the good life associated with that food. By what recipes exclude as well as include, in what they assume as much as what they specify, cookbooks define what is appropriate and what is not. They tell us what is French or Italian or Provençal or Tuscan, and what is not.

Culinary consciousness raisers, cookbooks tie food to place, and they do so whether or not we put the recipe in the oven and on the table. Actually executing the dish may be the most obvious mode of using the recipe, but it is by no means the only one. As much as we read recipes for instructions, we seek a sense of particular tastes and foods and places and how they fit together. Just as we can read far more than we can eat—which explains the prominence of food criticism and commentary—we are able to read infinitely more recipes than we are ever in a position to cook. To twist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s dictum that food must be good to think, really good recipes have to be good to read.

I shall make my case with a relative unknown. Just before the outbreak of World War I in France, in 1913, Les Bons Plats de France: cuisine régionale came out under the name “Pampille” (a kind of decorative fringe for furniture and clothes). The ideological import of this cookbook stands out all the more given the author’s marked political affiliations. Pampille, aka Marthe Allard Daudet (1878–1960), was the wife of journalist and politician Léon Daudet, the director of the royalist newspaper, L’Action Française.

Marthe Daudet collaborated with her husband on the journal for many years and was known for her culinary writings, particularly this cookbook. Marcel Proust, a good friend of Léon and the Daudet family, was a big fan of Marthe, whose “delicious books” and “incomparable recipes” he thought those of a “true poet.”

Pampille is such an emblematic figure because of her sense of herself as the culinary consciousness of France, a defender of tradition under siege in a rapidly modernizing world. All her work over a half century casts women as the guardians of those traditions. Hers is the voice of culinary France. She does not write as a “creator.” At outset Les Bons Plats de France warns us that the recipes that follow are not, in fact, in any ordinary sense hers—I don’t claim to have invented anything.” She has simply recorded what friends and acquaintances have passed on and what she herself has observed.

Yet the ostensible, even ostentatious, modesty of the persona that she cultivates belies Pampille’s ambition, for she aims at nothing less than defining France through its cuisine. That culinary country is not to be found in the extravagant creations of celebrated (male) chefs in fancy modern restaurants but rather in the unpretentious, familiar dishes made every day in ordinary kitchens by ordinary cooks. The building blocks of this culinary country, she shows us, are the dishes from the provinces, none of them creations of any individual, all of them products of the land itself. Pampille insistently fixes the nation in its parts, in the regional products and dishes that make the whole that is French cuisine.

The very title of the cookbook tells us as much—between these covers the reader will find the “good dishes of France,” which take us from the modern metropolis to the countryside. Pampille assigns “national” status to some dishes that cut across class as well as region—pot-au-feu (boiled beef), onion soup, chicken soup, cabbage soup,
leck and potato soup, potato salad, chicken fricassée, stews, omelets. These are the foods of peasant and bourgeois alike. Professional training has little to do with making these dishes what they are. The “poor fisherman” on the Mediterranean coast prepares bouillabaisse quite as well as the “cleverest Marseilles chef.” The local becomes the national, with the result that to taste one of the four soups “poems” is to partake of what is most authentically French. The part and the whole coincide.

Pampille is not shy about promoting French recipes and does not hesitate to call on historical and literary tradition to validate her recipes. Good game, for one striking example, can be found only in France. Why? Pampille reaches beyond the usual explanation that locates superiority in French soil and climate and growing conditions. It seems that the animals themselves possess an uncommon culinary consciousness and sense of duty. The hare, partridges, quail, and pheasants all eagerly participate in the culinary enterprise of which they will be part. They “seem to know” that they appear in traditional French fables and chronicles. “You might even say,” Pampille speculates, “that they are trying hard to justify their reputation for excellence.” Over the top? Tongue-in-cheek? Of course, but Pampille is dead serious about the indissoluble link between history and cuisine—that is, French history and French cuisine.

It is not just their (apparently uncontestable) quality that makes these products so essential and so French. For these ingredients do more than compose an exquisite dish; they transmit a landscape. “Every grain” of the special salt that connoisseurs recommend for the *pot-au-feu* contains a miniature landscape. What’s more, the diner belongs in that landscape. No less than the producer the consumer must be rooted in the land. Pampille anticipates the discussions we are having today by including the consumer in the culinary equation. Thus, to truly savor the “bouillebaisse of the North” known as matelote, this fish stew “has to be consumed on the banks of the Seine.” Pampille is categorical: if the lyrical landscape that she has just sketched isn’t part of the dish, the matelote falls flat, “it’s not even worth tasting.” The meal has to be consumed in the right spot—on the banks of the Seine for the matelote, the south for bouillebaisse that is “really good only in Marseille.” The fish do not travel, so the consumer must.

But a journey may not be enough to make the culinary connection. Pampille pushes the connection to place further still—so far, in fact, that she comes close to negating her whole project of spreading the good news about the good dishes of France. Even the most genuine bouillebaisse, made on the shores of the Mediterranean by a Marseillais chef, does not suffice for a true appreciation. To properly enjoy this dish from the South, she tells us, you really have to be born there. Why does this Parisian born and bred exclude herself along with most of her readers? Why provide a recipe for something whose consumption and production will necessarily fall short? The answer lies beyond ingredients and directives in the sense of place conveyed by the recipe, in an understanding of history, and a conviction of the absolute necessity of authenticity. Manifestly here, more subtly elsewhere, ideology trumps instrumentality. These recipes are definitely meant to be read.

France has long been known for its promotion of local venues. The *appellations d’origine contrôlées*—a system of patents on distinctive wines and foodstuffs—was put in place in the 1920s and institutionalized in 1935. Part of this same revalorization of the local, Curnonsky [Maurice Sailland] and Marcel Rouff’s gastronomic tour of the French provinces in the 1920s emphasized the homely virtues and bounty of the land. Resolutely set against the fast changing, visibly modernizing world of the postwar years, Curnonsky and Rouff will not, they tell us in the introductory volume, say a word about the “cosmopolitan hotels” where one goes for the latest craze. For gastronomy is “a Great School of Regionalism and Traditionalism,” which “makes us feel, understand, and love the prodigious variety, all the fertile diversity, of French soil.”

The recourse to tradition, to cultural values, to culinary practices and political principles of the past, responded to pervasive worries of loss of identity. The devastation of World War I exacerbated those fears, but they were present well before 1914, and Pampille is by no means alone in the nostalgic construction of French cuisine and country. Moreover, despite the apparent affinities of her culinary values and the nationalist program of *L’Action Française*, the culinary nationalism that she displays is not exclusive to the political right. The great chef Prosper Montagné (best known as the author of the *Larousse gastronomique*) sounded many of the same themes in *L’Œuvre*, a journal situated far to the left of *L’Action Française*.

Such promotion of culinary values across the political spectrum makes it clear that culinary chauvinism, in France as elsewhere, reaches far and wide. Cuisine and food, it would seem, whatever the form, bring together regions and nation, left and right, old and new. The “natural” culinary supremacy of France is one of those ideological constructs that have become so much a part of our lives that we take them for granted. As Roland Barthes showed us over a half century ago, this finely tuned culinary consciousness turns food in France into French food,
the expression and affirmation of a national identity that somehow exists outside of history. The general returning to France after defeat in Indochina who tucked into a much-photographed dinner of steak and French fries had it right and his critics wrong. The general chose his foods well. The “alimentary sign of Frenchness” broadcast fidelity to French traditions in a language that every French person would understand. The hegemonic, absolutely conventional culinary discourse constructs a nation without history, without politics, a nation rooted in terroir and tradition.

Culinary Nationalism Today

In our twenty-first century, culinary nationalism is alive and well, though it looks rather different than it did a hundred or even fifty years ago. The geographic and political boundaries that sustained culinary singularity have been all but abolished by rapid, reliable modes of transportation and technological innovations of all sorts. Producers and consumers routinely travel great distances and return enthused by the culinary cultures they have encountered. Pampille’s unabashed chauvinism and evident distaste for anything contemporary have little currency in today’s aggressively modern culinary world with its jet-setting, celebrity chef-entrepreneurs, specialty foods flown over vast distances, and hyper-sophisticated consumers who share information and judgments in an endless stream of journals, newspapers, and blogs.

Yet, more than ever food and cuisine are tied to place. The movement of goods and the blurring of borders notwithstanding, more and more countries propose culinary distinction as a marker of identity. From Austria to Singapore, from Norway to Brazil, aspiring culinary countries vaunt their edible traditions and indigenous foods to promote both tourism and exports. Paradoxically, the gastronomic adventures upon which we embark at home and abroad bring us back to place. Whether or not we actually talk about terroir, we seek connections between taste and place. We want French food to be recognizably French, Japanese cuisine to be identifiably Japanese, whether in Japan or abroad. Even hyphenated cuisines—Franco-Italian, Chinese-Peruvian—depend upon connection to a place or a tradition and usually both.

Because it is a social construct, that is, of our making, “authenticity” is not the property of an object as such. Which is precisely the dilemma of national identity. What fixes it? Who fixes it? When? Then, how does identity...
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to judge these culinary productions—performances, really. Despite the formidable organizational work and the ever-widening reach of the Bocuse d’Or into Asia, Australia, and the Americas, the competition retains a noticeably French inflection. Even more than the actual prizes won (see Table 1, above), French cuisine figures importantly in the training and work of many of the competitors and notably the winners. Should we expect otherwise? French culinary techniques and base preparations continue to play a big role in the training of chefs around the world. Moreover, the French, to quote a previous silver medalist, have a “culture of competitions.” Competitive cooking is also something of a French specialty. Many of the French contenders, for example, have already won the rigorous Meilleur Ouvrier de France [Most Skilled Worker in France] for distinction in culinary preparation. When they come on stage, the competing chefs proudly sport the blue, white, and red ribbons and medals. As New York–based French chef Daniel Boulud has noted, it takes a good year of honing competitive skills to make a viable candidate. In contrast to some of the Europeans who had been preparing for years, the American team (for which many, including Paul Bocuse, were rooting) had only a few months to prepare after winning the trials in October.

We may well ask why—and how—French cuisine maintains its edge in such an emphatically international enterprise. What is the nature of that edge? To be sure, the French origins and organization of the contest along with the long-standing prestige of French cuisine offer a partial answer. A more compelling explanation reaches beyond the specifics of the culinary encounters to the character of French cuisine itself. More emphatically than for many, even most other cuisines, the governing principles and practices of French cuisine structure a system. Unlike foods tied to place, that system travels easily. It is, to use the language of economics, highly portable.

Table 1. Principal Bocuse d’Or Winners 1987–2009

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To see how such negotiation works out in practice, consider international culinary competitions. The best known of these contests is probably the Bocuse d’Or, a biennial mega cook-off held in Lyon, France, founded in 1987 by much-celebrated French chef-entrepreneur Paul Bocuse. With sponsors ranging from Perrier and San Pellegrino to All-Clad cookware and the City of Lyon, the Bocuse d’Or in 2009 brought together twenty-four chefs from Singapore to Sweden, South Africa to South Korea, the contestants having been chosen in preliminary trials for Asia, Latin America, and Europe. (Canada and the United States entered in the individual category.)

The teams work according to strict guidelines, with the base ingredients specified only at the moment of competition. The slick videos show just how much the Olympics supply the model. The national teams enter pumping their fists, the audience in the stadium waves flags and cheers frenetically when their teams are introduced. The Oscars come to mind with the media-hyped presentations and the gold, silver, or bronze statuettes of Paul Bocuse brandished by the winners. Beyond the three main prizes, additional prizes went to Best Assistant [commis] (Canada), Fish (Denmark), Meat (Denmark), Best Poster (Brazil), Best Publicity (Czech Republic).

As with the more artistic Olympic events such as figure skating or ice dancing, questions arise as to the standards used to judge these culinary productions—performances, really. Despite the formidable organizational work and the ever-widening reach of the Bocuse d’Or into Asia, Australia, and the Americas, the competition retains a noticeably French inflection. Even more than the actual prizes won (see Table 1, above), French cuisine figures importantly in the training and work of many of the competitors and notably the winners. Should we expect otherwise? French culinary techniques and base preparations continue to play a big role in the training of chefs around the world. Moreover, the French, to quote a previous silver medalist, have a “culture of competitions.” Competitive cooking is also something of a French specialty. Many of the French contenders, for example, have already won the rigorous Meilleur Ouvrier de France [Most Skilled Worker in France] for distinction in culinary preparation. When they come on stage, the competing chefs proudly sport the blue, white, and red ribbons and medals. As New York–based French chef Daniel Boulud has noted, it takes a good year of honing competitive skills to make a viable candidate. In contrast to some of the Europeans who had been preparing for years, the American team (for which many, including Paul Bocuse, were rooting) had only a few months to prepare after winning the trials in October.

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A French restaurateur in New York a number of years ago invoked solfège—the rules of harmony. Once you learn the basic rules and understand the whole system, then—and only then—you can start cooking wherever and with whatever. Codes define French cuisine, not place, not products, and not people. The roster of winners of the Bocuse d’Or confirms that you do not need to cook in France or use French products or, for that matter, be French to cook in a French mode.

Concern for national culinary identity is hardly limited to France and the French. The Japanese are every bit as concerned over authenticity and the definition of “our food.” What is the status of rice imported from the United States? Is it Japanese? Is it Japanese enough? Here, too, techniques confront ingredients. Nobu Matsuhisa, the highly successful chef-restaurateur-entrepreneur, comes down squarely in favor of savoir-faire. “So long as you keep your feet planted in the techniques of Japanese cookery, new Japanese dishes can be created anywhere in the world”—a conviction that explains the many non-Japanese cooks in his many Japanese restaurants.12

Open to innovation yet mindful of tradition, this culinary model would seem to strike the requisite balance between old and new. But incorporation into a tradition depends on the ease of conversion. The more foreign the foods, the more essential a translation of the exotic into a familiar, or at least recognizable, gastronomic lexicon. To what degree can, or should, “authenticity” accommodate the demands of new publics? Should we insist on pits for a “real” clafoutis? Is a California Roll with avocado “real” sushi? What is its status when it turns up in Japan? As individuals and communities move about the globe through travel and immigration, culinary habits move with them and change.

The musical analogy alerts us to the constraints of this model and our capacity to welcome difference. Ever since the mid-eighteenth century when the term first appeared, “nouvelle cuisine” has been defined against, and also in terms of, the “old” cuisine. But what do we do when confronted with tastes for which we have no reference? When “nouvelle” is not just new but incomprehensible? Neither in cuisine nor in music are the rules of harmony universal. The very concept varies with the context. The more aggressively different the food—the greater the “yuck factor”—the less likely it is to be adopted.

Taste works from and to the familiar. Just as it takes will and effort and time for Western ears to appreciate Oriental tonalities, so culinary acculturation is a complex business and we remain highly selective of what we take from the exotic Other. Taste works from and to the familiar. While they may now eat frogs’ legs with gusto and find quiche and croissants as familiar as apple pie, most Americans steer clear of other bona fide French culinary delights, such as blood sausage and tripe. Even within a country regional specialties can run up against implacable resistance. My favorite childhood dessert, Indian Pudding, doesn’t even make it out of New England. Few would consider it in any sense a truly American dish.

French cuisine has long drawn great strength from its capacity to translate the exotic into familiar terms. That very success, however, has produced competitors. By making the foreign palatable, by introducing new tastes and pointing consumers elsewhere, any modern cuisine necessarily undermines its claims to culinary singularity.

Which is why recipes remain so important as identity markers. Along with other texts and images, they connect food to place. Thus, the Bocuse d’Or imposed as ingredients not simply cod, scallops, shrimp, and beef but specifically cod, scallops, and shrimp from Norway and beef from Scotland. Or, take menu descriptions—as conventionalized a designation as “sauce bordelaise” takes us to the wine country of Bordeaux, a Tarte Tatin puts us in Normandy even if we make the tarte with Golden Delicious apples from Oregon. And so on, for any cuisine.

The further we are from the origin of the product, the more likely we are to associate the place with the nation, not the region. Seen from afar, the nation subsumes the regions. Bordelaise sauce, Tarte Tatin are French dishes, spaghetti alla Bolognese is Italian. Whether in recipes or on menus or in food writing generally, names like these help us imagine the whole. Every nation must, in the end, be an “imagined community.”13

**Le Grand Chef**

To literally see culinary nationalism in action, and to follow the process of culinary identification, I propose a film, *Le Grand Chef* [Sik Gaek] from South Korea (2007).14 Based on a popular TV series, itself based on an equally popular graphic novel, *Le Grand Chef* tells the story of the culinary competition for a legendary knife that had belonged to the last Imperial chef. So intense was his devotion to the Emperor that, rather than practice his art for the Japanese occupiers, the chef chopped off his hand. The Japanese conquerors confiscated the knife. The film has melodrama and comedy, good guys and bad guys, a love story, filial devotion, great shots of food preparation, and wonderful lyric landscapes. Beyond the story of the culinary contest...
Le Grand Chef shows how culinary nationalism works to identify cuisine and country.

Very much like the Bocuse d’Or in its media frenzy, a series of trials pit the best chefs of Korea against each other (in fish, poultry, game, beef, the best coal [sic], and butchering a cow). Not until the final trial do the high stakes of this competition become apparent. It is nothing less than re-creating the soup that made the last Emperor weep just before his death, as the Japanese advanced to destroy the royal dynasty. In a complicated twist, the two finalists, the Hero (Sung-chun) and the Rival (Bong-ju), are grandsons of apprentices of the last chef and have been adversaries since their own early days as apprentices. The Rival’s grandfather, who had cooked for the Japanese, became chef-owner of an immensely successful, high-end restaurant, while the Hero’s grandfather, who remained staunchly Korean, retired to the countryside and gave up cooking. The Rival prepares an exquisite soup, but he uses a recipe left by his grandfather, which had therefore been approved by the Japanese. With soy sauce as an ingredient the soup, notsuprisingly, tastes Japanese. Its creator cannot be worthy of the knife that represents the nation.

The winning soup is far more ordinary, prepared lovingly following the recipe bequeathed the Hero by his grandfather. This is the soup that made the Emperor cry, and the Japanese businessman (son of the official who had tasted the exemplary soup, who is returning the legendary knife to Korea) explains why. The foreigner draws the lesson. The Korean judges offended by such an ordinary dish presented in competition could not appreciate what was so evident to the outsider, namely, that this humble soup contained the very essence of Korea. As the Japanese emissary points out in detail, each ingredient is tied to the land, to this people, and to their history. It takes an exceptional chef to put it all together.

Le Grand Chef touches on all aspects of contemporary culinary nationalism. Most obviously, and in a striking change from Pampille’s conception of French cuisine, the international context defines the national identity. The Japanese outsider recognizes the Korean-ness of the dish, and the film articulates this identity to the outside world—where it must compete with other cuisines and with other films.16 That competition drives the film—the ambition of the gentle Hero to be the best, the skulduggery of the rapacious Rival who fears losing his restaurant empire, the media that promote the contest on national television, the journalist hoping for a scoop.

Korean cuisine is clearly a function of ingredients that are themselves part of a landscape that includes the viewer. The film lingers on the lush countryside, on the abundance of country markets and the generous sociability of the people.17 The nation subsumes those landscapes, their produce, and their inhabitants. (A key shot zooms in on Korea’s national flower, the Rose of Sharon.) This film casts viewers as “consumers” of a nation imagined through its food and what its great chefs and humble cooks do with that food. It is a recipe writ large and turned into images. Virtually every frame of the film impresses upon us that cuisine, indeed, is country.

Surely the bottom line of whatever we consider food studies is the belief that what and how we eat is essential not only to the way we live but also how we think about life, about ourselves, and about the worlds that we inhabit. Every day each of us produces a culinary self out of the interplay between the local and the national, the material and the symbolic, between, in short, culinary place and cultural space. What, then, are we to make of culinary nationalism? How do we assess claims to culinary singularity? French cuisine has traditionally based its claims to distinction on a remarkably adaptable set of rules and principles. To what extent do other major culinary modes—say, Chinese or Japanese cuisines or Korean—welcome difference? How portable are they? How do they deal with unfamiliar products? The more a cuisine is defined by products and the more tied to place, the more limited its influence. Conversely, the more generalizable a culinary mode—take stir-frying—the greater both its utility and its prestige in our world of competing culinary countries.

Over the past decade Gastronomica has made a point of exploring those identities and taking us on journeys of discovery to culinary countries that most of us barely knew existed. More important still, its scholarly articles and reportages of events, the histories of particular foods and techniques, the interviews with chefs, not to overlook the vibrant photographs—all made connections between the culinary and the cultural, between the particular culinary places that we inhabit and the larger, infinitely varied world of food. In the exceptionally mobile culinary world of the twenty-first century, these texts and images enable us to choose our culinary country even as we create our own culinary identity.

NOTES

1. L’Action Française began publication in 1908 as a royalist newspaper and soon became notorious for its opposition to the Republic, fervent Catholicism, rabid antisemitism, xenophobia, and virulent polemics. Unfortunately, I have found little information about how much or in what capacities Marthe Daudet contributed to the paper. It seems a classic case of diadism for the concerns of everyday life, and especially those associated with women. See my article, “Chroniques de la vie quotidaine dans L’Action Française,” in: Le Maurrassisme, la culture et les milieux culturels, ed. Michel Leymarie (Paris: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2010, in press).


9. Elaine Scioliino, “Norway Wins the Bocuse d’Or Competition,” New York Times, 28 January 2009, see www.bocusedolor.com/2009/index.php, which includes videos of the 2009 competition as well as selections from previous competitions. The prize monies are not unimportant (20,000€/28,000, 15,000€/21,000, 10,000€/15,000), though they do not come close to the investment needed to bring any team to the competition. (The American team raised 500,000€, and the candidate and his assistant had a month leave to train for the competition.) On the World Pastry Cup, held just prior to the Bocuse d’Or in the same venue, see www.cmائاتسene.com/2009/en/, (France won the 2009 World Pastry Cup.) The World Bread Cup (Coupe du monde de la Boulangerie) is held every three years in Paris to promote artisanal breadmaking. With 578.51 points, the U.S. team placed fourth in the 2008 competition, well after France (607.92) but tightly clustered with Taiwan (579.49 points) and Italy (578.77 points). The Bread Bakers Guild of America sponsored the American team. See www.bbga.org/PDFs/ April%202006%20Bread%20Bakers%20Guild%20Team%20FAPK.pdf.


15. There is more than a little wish fulfillment in the formal apology of the Japanese emigrant for the conduct of his ancestor, his country, and for removing the knife from its rightful home.

16. Similarly, Babette’s Feast (1987), the great film of the Danish director Gabriel Axel, identifies the Frenchness of French cuisine from afar. The film, which takes place in Denmark, defines French cuisine against the very different local culinary practices. Other films also make use of the culinary outsider, from the Mexican Like Water for Chocolate (1992) to the American Big Night (1996) and the German Mostly Martha (2000).

17. The television series particularly emphasizes the countryside, with several episodes taking the Hero to different rural regions of the country. Korea’s national cuisine has inspired more than filmmakers. In 2005 the government of South Korea embarked on a Korean Cuisine to the World campaign, allotting ten million dollars to promote Korean cuisine abroad and at home. There are scholarships for South Koreans to travel and to attend culinary school, a research lab, and support for various food festivals. The U.S. is a prime target market, as it was for Chinese, Japanese, and Thai cuisines, whose success the South Koreans hope to emulate. See Julia Moskin, “Culinary Diplomacy With a Side of...,” New York Times, 22 September 2009, at www.nytimes.com/2009/09/23/ dining/23kore.html?_r=1&cxp=#&scp=1&sq=First%20Lady%20s%20SS%20Korea&st=cse. A similar preoccupation drives the current campaign to have French cuisine recognized by UNESCO as part of the world’s “intangible cultural patrimony.”