Jean-Baptiste Labat and the Buccaneer Barbecue in Seventeenth-Century Martinique

In late 1693 a rotund Dominican priest left the French port of La Rochelle, headed for the Caribbean colony of Martinique. He took with him, among other things, an ample supply of liqueurs. The missionary, Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, arrived on the island in early 1694, having consumed a great deal of food and drink at the captain’s table en route. The ship’s breakfast, Labat recorded, often included ham, pâté, a stew or fricassée, cheese, butter, and fresh bread, not to mention a “very good” wine. A typical midday meal consisted of soup with boiled fowl, followed by Irish brisket, biscuits, and fresh mutton and veal, accompanied by a chicken fricassée. The main course included a roast of some sort, as well as two different stews and two salads (made with beets, purslane, watercress, or cornichons confits, and either lettuce or wild chicory [chicorée sauvage] grown on board in crates filled with earth). Labat writes that “The crates were guarded night and day by a sentinel to prevent rats or sailors from damaging them.”1 The meal ended with a cheese course, stewed and fresh fruit, chestnuts, and preserves. The evening meal closely resembled the noon-time repast, although later in the day wine and alcohol flowed more freely: “Since we were well stocked with liquor, we didn’t spare it” (p.26). Remarkably, this constant feasting consumed a great deal of food and drink at the captain’s table en route. The ship’s breakfast, Labat recorded, often included ham, pâté, a stew or fricassée, cheese, butter, and fresh bread, not to mention a “very good” wine. A typical midday meal consisted of soup with boiled fowl, followed by Irish brisket, biscuits, and fresh mutton and veal, accompanied by a chicken fricassée. The main course included a roast of some sort, as well as two different stews and two salads (made with beets, purslane, watercress, or cornichons confits, and either lettuce or wild chicory [chicorée sauvage] grown on board in crates filled with earth). Labat writes that “The crates were guarded night and day by a sentinel to prevent rats or sailors from damaging them.”1 The meal ended with a cheese course, stewed and fresh fruit, chestnuts, and preserves. The evening meal closely resembled the noon-time repast, although later in the day wine and alcohol flowed more freely: “Since we were well stocked with liquor, we didn’t spare it” (p.26).

Born in Paris in 1663, Father Labat taught philosophy before serving in the French colonies of the Caribbean, then known as the West Indies, where he would remain until 1706. His account of this missionary voyage was published in 1722 in a lavishly illustrated set of six volumes entitled Nouveau voyage aux isles françaises de l’Amérique; he later expanded this edition, adding material on a wide variety of topics.4 Building on a missionary foundation established by many predecessors, most notable among them Father Du Tertre, Labat’s work in the Caribbean ranged from standard missionary service (baptizing the converted, saying Mass) to overseeing building construction, rum production, and military interventions against the British. Labat even worked hard to perfect the processing of sugarcane and has been erroneously credited with “inventing” the process of distillation.5 Like those who went before him, Labat recorded his adventures in copious detail in one of the many early travel narratives published by priests, clerics, explorers, and buccaneers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.6 Moreover, although his primary responsibility in Martinique and its environs was to serve the region’s multiethnic population as a spiritual leader, work he describes in great detail, Labat’s memoirs also chronicle his diverse culinary experiences, as he literally eats his way around the islands, learning to prepare such delicacies as roasted manatee, cacao confit, and monkey head soup. References to food and to food culture can be found on virtually every page of Labat’s chronicle; there are at least eighteen references to chocolat (as a beverage) in the abridged edition of 1993, as well as an entire chapter on cacao and another on café. Labat is aware of the unusually thorough nature of his culinary exploration, remarking, in one lengthy description of food preparation, “One might say that this is quite a lot of culinary documentation for an apostolic missionary” (p.188).7 While his initial experiences with island cuisine may be inscribed within the conventional frame of culinary tourism, Labat’s openness to the Caribbean’s remarkably diverse food cultures eventually allows him to construct new social, cultural, and symbolic meanings that inform both his personal and spiritual identity.

Labat begins to pay attention to the culinary arts per se early on, shortly after he established himself in his new parish at the northern tip of the island, in the region known as

Macouba. There, he dines frequently with his more well-to-do parishioners, M. Michel and M. Pocquet. While touring the latter’s new sugar manufactory, Labat is invited to dinner with Pocquet, “a man who prided himself on order in his affairs, sparing nothing at his table or in his furnishings” (p.61). In this residence of privilege, Labat does not fail to signal the superlative nature of the feast. The pièce de résistance is a plastron de tortue, or turtle breast, the preparation of which Labat describes with extreme care: the breastplate of the beast is detached from the animal with three or four inches of meat and fat attached and is cooked slowly in an oven over a low fire, seasoned with what Labat will come to recognize as classic (and ubiquitous) island ingredients: chili peppers, lime juice, cloves, salt, and pepper. His appreciation of this delicacy is palpable: “Never have I eaten anything so appetizing and with such good flavor” (p.61). The turtle is accompanied by several dishes of sea and river fish, and the meal ends with the sumptuous cacao confit whose preparation Labat chronicles in the Voyage aux îles. Labat again recounts its elaborate preparation, explaining how to select the right cacao berry (when not yet ripe, not yet yellow), dip it in water, and wrap it in slices of lime peel and cinnamon. The fruit is then immersed for several days in stronger and stronger batches of warm syrup made from “the most beautiful sugar” (p.62); the final immersion is augmented by essence of amber, musk, or other “fragrances.” This confection is deemed by Labat “the most delicious preserve one can imagine, and which surpasses, in my opinion, the very best of Europe.” He notes, finally, the exceptional nature of this occasion: “This preserve, as one can see, requires great care, and uses a great quantity of sugar. Island chefs rarely make it; and, at one écu per pound, they simply cannot undertake the process or make it as it ought to be made” (p.62).10

What does this culinary experience reveal about Labat’s gastronomic aspirations? First, that the missionary is curious and has an acute eye for detail as well as a keen epistemological mission: the collecting of, among other things, “documents de cuisine” through intimate culinary exploration. He is a true gourmand, with the intellectual goal of recording all the information necessary for recreating his gustatory experiences. We should note that this is a meal of privilege, fine dining at its best; Labat has not yet begun to negotiate the different foodways that existed on the island.11 The dynamic here is that of the unexamined touristic gaze, by which the familiar can begin to approach the exotic and the exotic become familiar, but the true process of indigenization, “the process of becoming ‘native’ to the colonial environment,”12 will require a great deal more exploration. At the home of M. Pocquet, Labat confronts Otherness only at the level of ingredients; no novel techniques are invoked, nor does Labat seem concerned with the notion of authenticity related to the experience. Indeed, if not for the slightly unusual ingredients involved, Labat might well be enjoying Sunday dinner in France: roast meat and, in an especially privileged home, a sweet dessert, shared with respectable peers.13

However, remarkably few of the truly interesting meals whose preparation Labat chronicles in the Voyage aux îles are meals of privilege, consumed with equals. Yes, he is often invited to dine with the habitants, the local plantation owners, but for the most part, Labat simply notes what was eaten, forgoing the culinary details, presumably because these simply echo French cooking practices of the time. When he tries to cook for himself, Labat will, initially at least, similarly apply European cooking techniques to exotic animals. Having purchased a particularly annoying parrot, for example, a bird that seems wont to screech in a disagreeable fashion rather than learn to talk, Labat has the animal killed: “I had it put in a casserole; its meat was very good, delicate, succulent” (p.154). He likewise praises the island’s amphibians, “the most beautiful frogs in the world.” Although they do not look like French frogs, their size and tender flesh make them particularly desirable. Extolling the bounty of this creature, Labat explains, “we prepare them like a chicken fricassée; and those people who arrive on the islands are often mistaken, imagining that we are serving them meat when in fact we are giving them a frog or lizard fricassée” (p.102). (The missionary’s slaves, knowing that Labat is especially fond of this treat, hunt for the frogs at night, croaking to attract them to torches made from dried sugarcane. Labat pays them well, noting that they must compete with voracious snakes to meet his request.) Indeed, while still relatively new to the island, Labat receives as a gift a large lizard—one and a half feet long, not counting the tail—which he prepares in the same fashion, en fricassée, giving us a remarkably early reference to the cliché “tastes like chicken.” He ate the one I had been given as a gift, prepared like a chicken fricassée; I would have thought it was one if I hadn’t seen it prepared myself, as its flesh so resembles that of chicken thanks to its whiteness, its tenderness, its good flavor, and its delicacy” (p.83).16 Given the size of the creature, which had to be restrained so that it could neither escape, bite, nor whip its tail, it is amazing that Labat attempted to prepare the dish at all. But he is still, in this instance, hardly straying from the mode of culinary tourist, procuring unusual ingredients and preparing them with essentially European culinary techniques.
Writing for a French public, Labat is concerned with finding comparative language that will allow his readers to appreciate his gustatory experiences vicariously. If lizard en fricassée tastes like chicken, the avocado—relatively unknown to the French but ubiquitous in the islands—tastes like “a marrow pie” (p.92) and, when underripe, may be sliced and eaten with salt and pepper, “like peppery artichokes in a vinaigrette whose flavor it shares” (p.92). Palm hearts are also compared in taste to artichokes and, like artichokes, may be eaten with a white sauce. They may also be battered and deep-fried, “like doughnuts,” or pan-fried, like fish (p.101). When he explains the process for salting an abundance of birds felled by a hurricane, Labat evokes a related French practice: “If…one could put them in lard, as one prepares goose thighs in France in their own grease, I think that they would be even better preserved” (p.167).19 When he makes a sauce for crab using the animal’s own taumalin (or tomalley, the green substance found in the body of shellfish), plus water, lime juice, salt, and crushed peppers, Labat uses as a point of comparison a common French practice: “When everything is cooked, we eat the flesh of the crab by dipping it in the tomalley, as one eats meat with mustard” (p.156). Whenever possible, that is, Labat caters to his inexperienced and untraveled French readers by developing comparisons to which they can relate.19

Because he was the consummate traveler, Labat’s peregrinations often took him far from the kitchen and out into nature, occasioning yet another culinary experience: meals prepared and consumed en plein air, an important first step away from Frenchified meals of privilege and home cooking. Labat’s outdoor dining experiences are frequently mentioned throughout the Voyage aux isles; in these descriptions Labat does not identify his dining companions. When traveling, the priest is often accompanied by one or more of his slaves; at other times, he takes his meals with members of the Carib Indian population.21 For the most part, on these occasions food is prepared simply: game, birds, or fish are grilled over a fire—cooked primarily en brochette (on skewers).22 One of the most interesting incidents in the Voyage involves a fishing expedition during
which a river is dammed and essentially poisoned with what Labat calls “inebriating wood” (p.100), so that the fish and eels in the river seem to become drunk and are easy to capture. Labat evokes the joys of feasting on this catch: “We ate our catch on the riverbank, where we dined; this is a part of the pleasure one enjoys fairly often in the Islands, and which is quite charming” (p.100). He does not say who “we” are—the only other individuals mentioned in the chapter are a carpenter stung by a scorpion, Labat’s slaves, and a company of infantrymen from the region who attend a procession of the Blessed Sacrament near Labat’s new church. The soldiers seem to be only of passing interest to Labat, so it is unlikely that they aided him in his fishing endeavors; we can assume that Labat is breaking bread on the riverbank with individuals who work for him, rather than with his peers.

What this passage and others like it make clear is that, while Labat enjoyed the more refined “French” dinners served him by the plantation owners, a good deal of his culinary exploration took place in spaces that we can tentatively identify as loci of indigenization. Not content simply to Frenchify his ingredients, Labat eventually sought out
more “authentic” island culinary practices, most of which he learned from unnamed sources, presumably either his slaves, the Carib Indians, or local buccaneers and pirates. One such instance occurs in the chapter containing the “drunken eels” anecdote described above, when Labat notes, “I was given palm worms to eat” (p.100). He does not name the person who gave him the worms. This omission, along with the nature of the food under consideration, suggests, again, that Labat is sharing the food of his cultural “inferiors,” a gesture of intimacy that involves true attention to, perhaps even a quest for, difference as a value. Labat’s description of the palm worm makes it clear that, after some initial disgust, he recognized the value of this source of protein:

These worms are about as thick as a finger, and about two inches long. One cannot see any significant organs, neither their entrails nor their intestines. The way to prepare them is to thread them onto a wooden skewer and to turn them over the fire; when they begin to get hot, one sprinkles them with grated bread crust mixed with salt, a bit of pepper, and nutmeg; this powder retains all the fat it soaks up; when they are cooked, one serves them with orange or lime juice. It is very good to eat, and very delicate once one has conquered the repugnance one ordinarily has for eating worms, especially when one has seen them alive. (p.100)

An even more detailed culinary discussion may be found in the chapter in which Labat presents the catching and preparation of the *toumhour*, a lagoon land crab (*Cardiosoma armatum*). Labat records three modes of preparation. First, the crab can be cooked whole, either in boiling water or on charcoal, then simply opened and eaten with salt. Second, a *taumalin* sauce can be prepared from the crab’s tomalley, as described above, mixed with water, lime juice, salt, and crushed peppers. Or, third, after removing the meat from the boiled crabs, one can

sauté them in a frying pan in a butter roux, with onion chopped very fine, and parsley; after which one puts them in a casserole dish with a bunch of fines herbes, pepper, orange peel, and egg yolks thinned with orange or lime juice; when one is ready to serve them, one grates a bit of nutmeg on them; it’s a very good dish. (p.156)

Just as interesting is Labat’s subsequent statement about how crab functions as a cultural equalizer:

The Carib Indians live on virtually nothing else. Slaves live on [crabs] instead of salted meat, which their masters often neglect to give them, either because it is rare or because it is dear. Whites do not overlook [crabs] either, and one can see, by the different methods of preparation that I have just described, that they are served on all sorts of tables. (p.157)

The taste for crab is universal in the islands, and while the various demographic groups might not often eat together, they do have something in common. Or so Labat suggests, before going on to refute the universality he has just posited, by claiming that crabs are difficult to digest, can cause “moodiness and hypochondria,” and even the dreaded *mal d’estomac*, which can end in incurable swelling or dropsy. Consequently, Labat “concluded that this food was good for the Carib Indians who are used to it, or for the slaves whose temperament is strong and robust, if it is good, I say, for these sorts of people, I do not find it at all good for Europeans, whose constitution is not as hearty” (p.157). It is almost as if, having noted the equalizing effect of his own words, Labat feels compelled to differentiate his fellow (European) creatures from the island Other (or Others), to the detriment of the weaker Europeans.

If Labat’s move from culinary tourism to engagement with the process of indigenization seems only tentative, at least as far as crab goes, his willingness to embrace one fundamental island culinary practice—the Caribbean *boucan*—is irrefutable. The word *boucan* is, as Jean-Pierre Moreau has explained, “an Amerindian term designating the place where meat is smoked,” which came to be associated with the *boucaniers* or buccaneers, French adventurers who, when chased by the Spanish from the smaller Caribbean islands to the larger Saint-Domingue, became hunters and *hommes de la brousse*, or bushmen. (Barbecue, by contrast, derives from an Arawak term, *barboukan*, and is more akin to what we call grilling.)

The first recorded French attribution of the word *boucan* dates from 1654, and the technique is still a ubiquitous culinary phenomenon in Martinique today. According to the pirate Alexandre Oexmelin, the buccaneers were hirsute, tanned, and disheveled. They hunted wild cattle so they could cure the hide for leather, and wild boar so they could smoke and sell the meat. They lived in the forest, slept on the ground, wore blood-soaked clothing, and ate primarily wild fruit and game, with a particular taste for the hot marrow of a fresh kill. Although they had existed in the islands for only about fifty years before Labat’s arrival in Martinique, their primitivism had already made them a subject of legend. Labat makes multiple references to impromptu *boucans* throughout the *Voyage aux isles*. Two rather lengthy sections of the text merit closer attention, due to Labat’s detailed descriptions of the culinary techniques involved. The first, entitled “A Turtle Boucan,” is recounted at something of a remove, since the process takes place in the company of various plantation owners and is carried out primarily not by Labat himself, but by slaves. They are
again referred to by the indeterminate French pronoun on (either “one” or “we”) but are this time contrasted with the “we” (Labat and company) who will partake of the feast. The cooking process is fascinating in its combination of traditional French ingredients and island condiments. The meat of two large sea turtles is mixed with hard-boiled egg yolks, fines herbes, spices, lemon juice, salt, and a good quantity of chili pepper, then the mixture, or pâté, is stuffed back into one of the turtle bodies. The whole thing is smoked in a hot sand pit under charcoal. Aesthetic considerations are not neglected: a special table is built to accommodate the dish, which requires the strength of four men to transport it, and the table is decorated with leaves and flowers. The experience of eating this marvelous pâté exceeds Labat’s ability to portray it in words: “hardly had they lifted it than an odor a thousand times better than I could possibly say emanated from it; in a word, never has the odor of pâté tickled the smell more delicately than that which spread all around us as the turtle was opened” (p. 188).

Curiously, Labat apologizes to the reader for his penchant for recording every new cooking practice he encounters:

One might say that this is quite a lot of culinary documentation for an apostolic missionary; to which I must respond that when one is obliged to take care of one’s household, one is simultaneously obliged to instruct oneself about many things, things with which I would not have burdened my memory if I had still been in my cloistered monastery, but obedience having employed me in this state, I have been at the same time obliged to become familiar with all that this state depends upon, taking into consideration the necessity we have of staying alive, and often of preparing for oneself that which is necessary to sustain life. (p. 188)

This statement, coming as it does toward the middle of the Voyage aux iles, points to an apparent tension, if not contradiction, between Labat’s epistemological enterprise and his apostolic mission and, as such, warrants further attention. First, Labat is conscious of the role place plays in this process: if he had remained in his cloister, none of this encyclopedic culinary documentation would have been necessary, as his needs would have been met by simple monastic fare. He therefore couches his apology in terms of obligation and obedience to his order: he is obliged to take care of his household, he is obliged to become an autodidact, all this because he has obediently undertaken this mission, and is thus obliged to acquire, accumulate, and, of course, record knowledge essential to the continuation of life. Hence, Labat constructs an identity for himself according to which he lives in the tension between the need for knowledge (which, on the one hand, appears self-indulgent but is, in fact, evidence of his self-reliance) and the deprivations conventionally associated with life as a Catholic missionary. It is perhaps not surprising that Labat also feels compelled to justify his willingness to consume both lizard and various fowl during Lent: far from French bishops, he tells us, missionaries, in consultation with doctors, must adjust the categories of acceptable dietary restrictions to fit the circumstances of daily life in the islands (p. 182).

Nowhere does Labat connect his work as culinary documentarian to the greater tradition of his own church, although he must certainly have been aware that the Christian tradition is profoundly grounded in commensality, in fellowship at table, both at the Eucharistic altar and in the meals afterward, meals like those that follow his own apostolic interventions at parishes throughout the islands. Nourishment is a fundamental metaphor in Christian life; Christ ate with the marginalized, an inclusive public activity that made present the Kingdom of God on Earth. However, as Labat appears unwilling to explore this apologetic option consciously, one wonders if he has embraced the notion of Christian fellowship through food as part of his apostolic mission. Does his unwillingness represent a glimmer of resistance to true communion with the Other, especially an “inferior” Other, or is it merely an oversight? It is a question worth pondering.

One final example of Labat’s move toward indigenization, an example that combines elements of his social, cultural, and religious identities as priest, party animal, and would-be pirate, can be found in the ceremonial boucan de cochon, which can be loosely translated as “pig roast.” In the chapter entitled “A Pig Boucan,” Labat narrates his own negotiation of a food realm that is eminently Other, a realm already, in a sense, indigenized, born in the bush as a combination of Amerindian, African, and European cuisines, the legend of which he has absorbed in detail. This time, Labat is the orchestrator of the feast, and his quest for authenticity is palpable. In preparation for the event Labat has an ajoupa (thatched hut) built in case of rain; he has a pig trussed and delivered to the riverbank along with wine to be chilled there. (Labat was particularly fond of Madeira, which he imported regularly, although he also enjoyed a wide variety of mixed drinks and fermented beverages.) In addition to his repeated use of island terminology (ajoupa, balisier, cachibou, and so on), Labat insists that his guests follow a strict set of rules associated with the legendary buccaneers. Among other stipulations, no metal utensils may be used; no liquids may be mixed (that is, water and wine); guests are called to table using...
two gunshots; and empty-handed hunters are punished for their failure to contribute appropriately to the meal. Given what we can surmise of the disorderly lives of the true buccaneers (based on primary accounts), this attention to the “rules” of the boucan seems a cultural construction, a conflation of elements of primitivism in the buccaneer legend with the rigors of Labat’s own monastic training—a provocative example of indigenization. Labat insists on industry as a value: each guest has a job to do, be it carving skewers, making napkins out of leaves, constructing the boucan, building the fire to make charcoal, or hunting for game to complement the meal. This emphasis on industry is also explicitly linked to Labat’s indigenization of the missionary life: guests are separated into “initiates” (les anciens) and “novices”; hunters who bring back insufficient game are made to do “pénance” (of an uncommon sort: they must drink as many glasses of wine as the best hunter has brought pieces of game); and so on. Grace is said. In true apostolic fashion, the master buccaneer serves his guests, then teaches them to serve each other as well. In this buccaneer feast Labat clearly combines elements from several registers of existence: the buccaneer lifestyle, island cuisine, slave culture, and monastic rigor. It is perhaps the best example of Labat’s transformation from culinary tourist to intimiste assimilant into island culture, all through the mediation of food.

In Solibo magnifique, the contemporary Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau anchors his island’s colonial past in culinary tradition:

Culinary references are... inscribed in our history. Salt pork speaks of the maritime epoch, when boats fed us during the sweats of the first plantations. Then came the colonial period during which the béké tolerated our garden plots. Then we ate yam, dasheen, and grew peas and manioc—O king manioc!...which weaned us from the breast, with its milk and cream.

As Chamoiseau asserts, Caribbean history is intricately linked to the diversity of its culinary traditions, which are traceable over the centuries in parallel with historical memory itself. In his negotiation of new experiential food realms, the missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat is an integral part of that history, framing the food experience as a cultural artifact in context, naming and translating elements of that experience for an audience that is both like him and Other, explicating the process from a “native” perspective, adapting his text—and his culinary practices—to meet the needs of both his readership and the extended Caribbean community. As Lucy Long has suggested, “Food, like any cultural product, is multi-vocal and polysemic, and new meanings can be recognized in new contexts.” In one sense, Labat’s performance of indigenization through curiosity and cuisine ultimately resembles not the refined cacao confit of his initiation, but rather the pâte of the boucan de tortue: Labat does not “eat the Other,” he strives to become Other, a polysemic richness that reflects the ample diversity of Caribbean culinary culture to the present day.

NOTES
1. Jean-Baptiste Labat, Voyage aux isles. Chronique aventureuse des Caraïbes, 1693–1705, ed. Michel Le Bris (Paris: Phébus Libriert, 1995), 26. All quotations from Labat’s text have been taken from this 1995 edition; page numbers appear in the text within parentheses. All translations from Labat and other texts in French are my own.
2. Lucy Long, in Culinary Tourism (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), defines “culinary tourism” as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other.” The phenomenon is one in which food is “both a destination and a vehicle for tourism” (p.2) “and a vivid entryway into another culture” (p.1).
4. Jean-Baptiste Labat, Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amérique: contenant l’histoire naturelle de ces pays, l’origine, les mœurs, la religion & le gouvernement des habitans anciens & modernes: Les guerres & les evenemens singuliers qui y sont arrivës pendant le long séjourn que l’auteur y a fait... Nouvelle ed. augmenté considérablement, & enrichie de figures en tailles-douces, 8 vols. (Paris: Chez Théodore le Gras... 1742).
8. The Taino people seasoned their food with chili peppers as early as the thirteenth century. See Lynn Marie Houston, Food Culture in the Caribbean (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 4.
9. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, the consumption of turtle was reserved for the wealthy. See Madeleine Ferrières, Nourritures canailles (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 178–179.
10. Labat records another possible preparation of the cacao. “When one wants to dry them, one takes them out of their syrup, and, after letting them drip, one plunks them into a bowl of very clear syrup fortified with sugar, then one puts them immediately into a drying oven, where they are candied.” (62)
11. Labat will have similar experiences dining on a crayfish potage with M. Michel (83) or roasted baby manatee à la broche, consumed with M. Bouchard (162).
13. Ferrières, Nourritures, 15–16, has noted the scarcity of sugary desserts in the early modern period. “Does one receive guests?... Then, respecting the rules of hospitality, one offers them that rarity: sugared preserves. Honorable individuals had the right to sugared preserves; people of ‘middling worth’ would have those,
less costly, made with grape wort; as for the ‘little people,’ they had marmalade which couldn’t be preserved at all, or nothing!” As one might imagine, according to Houston, Food Culture, 13-14. “Many European settlers...adamently did not want to relinquish their European food customs while living in the Caribbean. Those who came to the Caribbean hoping to strike it rich often desired to reproduce and emulate the lifestyles of the European upper classes. This being the case, the middle and lower classes from Europe who settled in the Caribbean are the ones directly responsible for the beginning of the creolization of cultures that gives Caribbean cooking its unique flavor.”

14. The reference to caserole is en daube, an expression dating to about 1640, from the Italian addobbo, “seasoning,” from addobbare, meaning “to cook,” a way of cooking certain meats by braising them in a closed pot. In the 1724 edition of his book Labat similarly makes reference to a group of birds resembling flamingos (flammands), which, when they could not be tamed, were killed and eaten, although the preparation of the meal is not described (Labat, Nouveau voyage, 490).

15. Labat adds that, to European eyes, these would be called estrapados, or toads (tortoises), living as they do in trees rather than in water, and having gray skin with yellow and black stripes or spots.

16. Scientist Joe Staton has studied in detail, from an evolutionary perspective, the question of why most cooked exotics taste like cooked Gallus gallus, the domestic chicken. He proposes (tongue in cheek) that a more apt expression might be “tastes like a tetrapod.” See Joe Staton, “Tastes Like Chicken?” Annals of Improbable Research 4 (July–August, 1998): 9.

17. Houston, Food Culture, 114, cites fricassée de poulet as “one of the classic French Caribbean staple dishes,” although after arriving in Martinique Labat virtually never mentions this dish nor the preparation for chicken. Ferrières, Nourritures, 417, notes that the first official reference to the technique dates to before 1585. In the original, seventeenth-century version of the classic fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty,” by Charles Perrault, described this activity as “entertaining” (324).

18. This is also the occasion for Labat to learn a new culinary technique: “But the quantity [of birds] that I had would have been entirely useless if I hadn’t been taught the secret of preserving them by marinating them” (167). While, according to the Petit Robert, the verb marinier has existed in France since 1552, Labat had apparently never preserved meat this way before.

19. It is also in this context, and others like it, that Labat, echoing his religious training, refers to certain ubiquitons and nourishing food sources as “a veritable manna for the country” (101); he makes this assertion regarding palm hearts (ibid.), tourlourous or lagoon land crabs (157), and diablotons, the devil-bird or crrott (180).

20. The modern term pique-nique has its roots in the 1694 idiom nèpès à pique-nique, from piqué and nique, a little thing without value; however, Labat does not seem to be familiar with the word.

21. See Toczyski, “Navigating the Seas.”

22. This style of preparation has been known in France since the twelfth century, the term en brochette, from the word broche (ca. 1211), a small spit used to roast or grill small pieces of food, dates from about 1580. This method was often avoided because it entailed a significant loss of fats and oils, desirable for their high caloric content at a time when few were privileged enough to eat meat on a regular basis. See Ferrières, Nourritures, 120-121.

23. This substance, called bois à envoyer (literally, “inhibiting wood”), is also known as mort aux poissons in French. It is made from the roots of the shrub Tephrosia cinnerea or asher horence, which have a thick outer peel that is crushed with some of the plant’s leaves and then mixed with quicklime. When the mixture is thrown into the water, the fish seem to become inhibited, rising to the surface and throwing themselves against the rocks on shore. Its use is attested in many Amerindian contexts; for a reference to one such plant in Martinique see Françoise Hattenberger, Paysages et végétations des Antilles (Martinique). Kurbaka, Coll. Espaces Caraïbes Amérindiens, (2001), 234.

24. On board a sea vessel with Captain Trehbuchet and a group of pirates, Labat enjoyed shark in the open air. Blecated between Saint-Christophe and Sainte Croix, the men pass the time fishing for sharks, which they prepare and eat for dinner; however, because there is such an abundance of the “carnivorous fish,” for sport the men also cut off the dorsal fin of several of the animals, attach an empty barrel to their backs to prevent them from diving, and re-release them into the water, occasioning a shark frenzy no doubt terrible to behold, although Labat describes this activity as “entertaining” (234).

25. The nineteenth-century American writer Lafcadio Hearn, who visited the islands from 1889 to 1890, states that palm worms were one of four “holiday luxuries of the poor.” See Lafcadio Hearn, Two Years in the French West Indies (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), 357. Labat also hunts coots with his slaves; see Toczyski, “Navigating the Seas.” In Voyage he details various preparations for them, including one using Jamaican allspice (180-182).

26. Labat claims to have witnessed severe symptoms in Europeans who had eaten crab (157-158): “they become pale, yellow and puffy, their feet and legs swell; they experience an extraordinary lassitude, with a weightiness of the head that causes them constantly to wish to sleep, their belly and their stomach swell, and they finally fall into an incurable state of drop.”

27. Labat extols the medical virtues of many of the food items he encounters (and consumes) during his stay in the islands. Turtle meat is cited as “very nourishing” (63). Similarly, the apricot “is excellent for the chest, very healthy and most nourishing” (91), while the avocado is even more remarkable: “it is very good for the stomach, warm and most nourishing. The use of this fruit stops the mumps and dysentery, but since it tends to warm one quite a bit, it also provokes unhealthy sexual appetites” (92). Labat even comments at length on the European habit of overcooking meat, a method that removes some of the nutritional benefits of fowl, for example: “The woodpigeon should be eaten half-cooked, and still rare, so to speak. Doctors’ insistence that most meats should be eaten so cooked, toasted or boiled that they have lost almost all juices, is an error” (598). It should be noted that this question had been posed well before Labat’s time, for example, by Laurent Joubert, personal physician to Catherine de Medicis, in his 1578 treatise Eaux purulentes, see Ferrières, Nourritures, 27.


29. The nineteenth-century English admiral James Burney inaccurately conflated the two terms: “The flesh of the cattle killed by the hunter was cured to keep good for use, after a manner learnt from the Caribee Indians, which was as follows: The meat was laid to be dried upon a wooden grate or hurdle (grille de bois) which the Indians called barbeau, placed at a good distance over a slow fire. The meat when cured was called a boucan, and the same name was given to the place of their cookery. Pierre Labat describes viande boucannée, to be ‘meat dried over a small fire and smoked’ (‘viande vechie à petit feu et à la fumée’).” See History of the Buccaneers of America (1596, London: George Allen & Company, 1912), 48.


31. The Carib Indians, Labat tells us, also used this method to smoke the appendages of the enemies they had slain, which they then offered as gifts. Arriving on a bacana (a type of boat), forty-seven Caribs pay Labat a visit; their craft is decorated with “a marmouset’s head en relief...with the arm of a man who has been boucané; that is to say, dried over small fire and smoked, attached next to the marmouset. They offered it to me most civilly, telling me it was the arm of an Englishman they had killed a short time ago during a raid they had carried out in Barbuda” (128). Later, the gentleman M. Collet asks a group of Caribs to break off commerce with the English: “All of which they did; they handed over the horses and massacred the first Englishmen who fell into their hands, and brought some of their boucanéed members to Fort Royal to show us that they had entirely broken off with our enemies” (161).

32. For example, during a hunting trip to Saint-Domingue in the company of three pirates, Labat says, “Never have I found the hunting more abundant, the parks of Versailles are nothing in comparison. We killed in less than a country week seven wild boars and as many of their young, as well as common hens and roosters that had become wild...as well grouse, pigeons, woodpigeons, and goats, as many as we could wish for. We made a big fire, and enjoyed the great boucan and lived it up all night long, and the pleasure it gave us hardly permitted us to sleep” (235). Later, he speaks of the unique opportunity of enjoying “pork boucané in long thin slices,” adding, “I found this meat to be so excellent, and having a very different flavor than that of the pig or the wild boar one eats in Europe” (351). The 1724 edition of his book includes a lengthy description of how to prepare a boucan of wild pig or long strips, so that it can be stored for later consumption (Labat, Nouveau voyage, 233-234). At a stop on the small island of Coiffe-à-Mott (so named because, from a certain angle, the landscape resembled a corpse stretched out on a table), Labat and his men seize as much as they can of the provisions of Spanish fishermen on the island. “We dined on shite at their expense. We had two turtles cooked in boucan, and other meat as well, as much as we thought we would need until Saint Thomas” (167). Clearly, le boucan is an expedient way of meeting the needs of a traveling entourage.
33. Labat is very sensitive to aesthetic considerations in the exploration of new foods. He speaks, for example, of the “beautiful green color” of the avocado and of “the very vivid red flesh, scented with small seeds” of prickly pears (365–366), but he also records this disconcerting vision of monkey soup: “It is true that at first I experienced some repugnance when I saw four heads on the soup resembling the heads of small children, but as soon as I had tried it, I easily ignored this consideration and I continued to eat with pleasure” (321).

34. Ferrières notes that such considerations had already been debated in France: “[Frogs], as far as canon law is concerned, are meat one is allowed to eat during Lent. But they must be warned that the missionaries who live in the islands and who, by an apostolic concession, exercise in several areas the power of bishops, after a mature deliberation and serious consultation with doctors, have declared that lizards and coots are acceptable Lenten fare, and that consequently, they could be eaten at any time of year” (182).

35. See, for example, Matthew 8:11, where Jesus says: “I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven”; or, the story of the road to Emmaus: “He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have said! Was it not necessary that these things should take place in fulfilling the law of Moses and the prophecies, according to the determination of God over Jesus, that he should suffer? Why were the prophets so slow of understanding, and so slow of heart to believe for the promises made in his name?’” (Luke 24:25–31).

36. For more on this subject see Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), 91 and 179.

37. Houston, Food Culture, 91, links the phenomenon of jerked meats to the boucan: “African hunters, brought to the Caribbean as slaves, brought with them their style of pit-cooking meat…Since the mid-eighteenth century, when the first written accounts of jerking were recorded, the dish has come to be known as a staple of the Maroons, the runaway slaves, and subsequently their descendents, living in communities in the mountain highlands of Jamaica. Although Maroons would wrap a marinated pig in leaves and steam it in its juices by burying it in a hole surrounded with hot stones, or grill a pig 12 to 14 hours over an outdoor fire of green wood, now jerk is often made on a barbecue grill, in the oven, or with a stove-top smoker.”

38. In this instance the pig happens to be a domesticated one, although Labat seems quite clear on the superiority of the cochon marron, due, in part, to the animals’ diet. He notes, “There is a region on the island of Saint-Domingue [present-day Haiti/Dominican Republic] where, amongst other fruit trees, one finds an infinite quantity of avocados and apricots of the most marvelous thickness and length. The wild pigs…go there from all around when these fruits are ripe and fall from the trees, either because of their ripeness, or because they are shaken off by the wind. Then, these animals grow marvelously fat and their flesh develops an excellent flavor as a result” (92).

39. Labat’s description of the boucan de cochon makes it sound more like a barbecue grill than an efficient and enclosed smoker, and images from the period suggest that the boucan de cochon was prepared this way by the buccaneers themselves. For one such reproduction see Jean Merrien, Histoire mondiale des pirates, librairies et négriers (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1959), 149. The turtle boucan is more clearly smoked as in a smoker.

40. One is reminded of the Last Supper, at which Jesus said: “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should do also” (John 13:14–15). However, at the end of this elaborate boucan, the guests have so depleted the pig’s carcass that there is no cochon boucané left for the slaves, who have to content themselves with “the other food we had brought” (141). Clearly, the last are not yet first.

41. Labat does not insist that his guests don the bloodstained clothing of their models: “a small linen jersey, and shorts that came only halfway down their thigh…drenched with the blood that dripped from the flesh of the animals they were in the habit of carrying.” See Oexmelin, quoted in Deschamps, Pirates, 41.

42. Ultimately Labat was forced to leave Martinique because his coreligionists found him overbearing and intolerable. In fact, he remains the bogeyman of the island. Grandmothers still warn their grandchildren, “If you don’t go to sleep right away, Father Labat will come and get you!” See Aurelia Montel, Le père Labat viendra te prendre (Paris: Masonnave & Larose, 1996), 179.

43. Patrick Chamoiseau, Soliloque magnifique (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 144. The word bèke is an abbreviation of the term blan-to-côte, often used in a derogatory fashion and referring to francophone island inhabitants whose ancestors were white.

44. Long, Culinary Tourism, 35.

45. Pierre L. van den Berghe, “Ethnic Cuisine: Culture in Nature,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 7:3 (1984): 396: “Ethnic cuisine could well be the ultimate reconciliation between a diversity we cherish and a common humanity we must recognize if we are to live amicably together.”