Talking About Cooking
Alexandre Dumas’s *Causerie culinaire*

**Alexandre Dumas** (1802–1870) is best known to the English-speaking world for *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and other popular novels of romance and adventure. But students of culinary history also recognize him as a formidable and influential gourmet, in particular as the author of *Le grand dictionnaire de cuisine*, left unfinished at his death and published posthumously in 1873. At times Dumas considered this project to be one of his most promising ventures—referring to it in 1860 as “the pillow of my old age”—although posterity has not necessarily agreed with him on its relative worth.

In his own day Dumas was also renowned as a journalist; his serialized fictions, political opinions, occasional essays, critiques and reviews, and even war correspondence frequently appeared in the daily and weekly press. In fact, Dumas launched several newspapers of his own, editing, occasionally financing, and providing a good deal of the content for such dailies and weeklies as *Le Mousquetaire* (1853–1857), *Le Monte-Cristo* (1857–1860, 1862), and *D’Artagnan* (1868).

In order to meet his journalistic commitments as well as to fill the columns of his own papers, Dumas often resorted to an original and personal form of writing, which he called *causeries* or “chats.” “*Le causerie,*” he wrote in 1854, “is a condition of our chattering language, a consequence of our talking about cooking.”

**Above:** Caricature of Alexandre Dumas at the table, drinking and writing. Anonymous engraving on wood, ca. 1857. Collection of the Société des amis d’Alexandre Dumas. © AKG Images/Gilles Mermet

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companionable character. As I progressively advance in age, the need to chat has become more and more of a passion for me—the elderly tell stories!—so much so, that to satisfy my tastes, I have founded a newspaper!"

These causeries were high-spirited ruminations on all sorts of subjects that interested Dumas, from art to literature to history to the social mores of the day, sometimes all gathered together in the same column. Occasionally he turned his attention to his culinary interests. In 1858 “Causerie culinaire” appeared in the May 20 issue of Le Monte-Cristo, followed in the June 3 issue by “Causerie macaronique.” These two causeries were brought together under the title “Almanach of Grimod de la Reynière”

The French had been actively writing about cuisine since the previous century, in cookbooks, philosophical musings, and even restaurant reviews (in particular, the Almanach of Grimod de la Reynière). But “Causerie culinaire” – which I have translated as “Talking about Cooking” —brings together all of these objectives in one occasional essay by a master of the form. Still occasionally cited or referred to in studies of gastronomy today, “Causerie culinaire” remains a pioneering example of gastronomic journalism. As far as I can determine, this is its first complete English translation.

“Talking about Cooking”
By Alexandre Dumas

I note with pleasure that my culinary reputation is expanding and promises soon to erase my literary reputation. God be praised! I will then be able to devote myself to an honorable trade, and bequeath to my children, in place of books from which they’ll benefit for only fifteen or twenty years, pots and pans from which they’ll benefit for all eternity, and which they will be able to bequeath to their descendants, just as I have bequeathed them to mine.

So, since it is likely that one day or another, I will abandon the pen for the ladle, I am not at all sorry to lay down in advance the foundations for the true monument to my fame. Who’s to say that Carême will not live longer than Horace; and Vatel, who cut his throat, than Lucan, who opened his veins.5

I’m announcing to you, then, that as soon as certain rights still held by certain publishers over my publications are released—and that won’t be for very long—I will place before your eyes a book of practical cookery the use of which, I declare, will enable the most gastronomically ignorant of persons to make a sauce espagnole or a mirepoix just as well as my honorable friend Vuillemot.6 I’m already receiving letters from every part of France, letters asking for my advice, this one on polenta, this on caviar, this one on birds’ nests.

Now, you ask me, dear readers, where does my taste for cooking come from and under what master have I studied cooking? My taste for cooking, like that for poetry, comes to me from above. One was destined to ruin me—the taste for poetry, of course—the other to enrich me; and I’ve not turned my back on being rich one day.

As for the master under whom I’ve studied, how am I supposed to tell you that—I, who am preeminently eclectic? I’d studied under all the masters and, in particular, under that grand master known as necessity. Ask my travel companions in Spain how for three months I managed to get them to eat salad without oil and without vinegar, so much so that on their return to France, they would have nothing more to do with oil and vinegar. They’ll tell you so.

In addition, I’ve known great practitioners: Grimod de la Reynière, uncle of my good friend Dorset; Brillat-Savarin, who lives on, not as a magistrate, but as the inventor of carp-roe omelets; Courchamps, who’s left behind the best Dictionnaire de cuisine in existence, and who has only one defect, that of being too spiritual—I’m talking about the Dictionnaire de cuisine, of course. (The reputation of La Cuisinière bourgeoise is based on that admirable nonsense: To make a rabbit stew, get a rabbit.)7

I’ve told you that I was going to leave for Greece and Egypt in order to visit the places heralded by Homer and Virgil and the river made illustrious by Sesostris and Cambyses. Nothing of the sort. I’m going to do research on the black broth of Leonidas and Cleopatra’s stuffed boar.8

I’ve traveled a lot. Everywhere in my travels I’ve had myself introduced to skilled cooks and recognized gourmets, and if I’ve learned a little chemistry, it wasn’t, as some have thought, to make recipes for poisons to be used by Madame Villefort,9 but to prepare scientifically certain recipes necessary for the confection of certain dishes.

From my childhood I’ve been a hunter and a free-trader. You’re going to see how these two characteristics have made a cook of me. From 1815 onwards my mother had acquired ownership of a tobacconist shop and a license to sell powder and lead shot for the hunt. I was twelve. From the age of twelve to fifteen I was a poacher. From the age of fifteen onwards, I became a hunter. I filled my powder keg and my shot bag and I left, gun permit in my pocket and rifle over my shoulder. I sometimes went three or four days without returning. How did I live? By bartering my hares, my rabbits,
The duke was a great gourmet. To pay a visit to the Roman amphitheater at Djemdjem. But it was only later, and when I had been thinking about madame de Montesson and the father of Philippe-Egalité.10 The duke was a great gourmet. So, my grandfather had collected some good recipes which my mother had inherited. But it was only later, and when I was still bookish about cooking, that these very same recipes captured my imagination. It’s during this time, when I was devoted to primitive cooking, that I could appreciate the superiority of chicken roasted on a string to chicken roasted on a spit.

So, in culinary science, as in all science, much is owed to chance. I have a way of preparing rabbit which belongs only to me and which I shared with Courchamps in 1840 in exchange for another gastronomic secret and which is due entirely to chance. I’m talking about rabbit cooked in its own skin. Listen closely to this, dear readers.

In 1835 or 1836 I was traveling along the African coast. To pay a visit to the Roman amphitheater at Djemdjem involved crossing a bit of desert. We made a stop with our guides about halfway there. I’d bought a sheep for six francs and gave it as a gift to my Arabs for their dinner. I was going to dine myself on some eggs, a pilaf, and prickly pears when, upon turning my eyes toward the Arabs, I saw them preparing their lamb in a manner that interested me.

They had, before anything else, slit its throat in Muhammad’s name, after which, without skinning it, they had opened its belly, pulled out its intestines, and left it its rabbit punch. After which, they neatly stitched its belly back up. During this time, others had dug a pit in the ground, lined it with flat rocks, packed it with dry branches, and had set the branches on fire. The branches formed a bed of embers. On the bed of embers, my Arabs lay their sheep down and covered it with dry branches, which they set on fire. These dry branches, within an instant, were reduced, in turn, to embers. The lamb then lay between two beds of embers, cooking like a chestnut.

This method of baking first produced a smell of grilled wool, quite unpleasant, but soon to be evaporated and replaced by an aroma of roasting meat so succulent that we saw rising on the horizon eight or ten jackals and two or three hyenas attracted by this delicious emanation. At the end of an hour, my Arabs judged their sheep to have reached its proper degree of cooking and pulled it from its oven. It was placed on a long banana leaf and scraped like a pork butcher scraps a pig he has just singed. In place of that first blackened and charred layer appeared a ravishing layer of red and brown. After an instant or two, an unctuous and aromatic sweat covered this skin.

My Arabs beckoned me to sit down with them; they’d invited me to dinner.

I accepted. Their braised eggs and chicken with rice. Each one stretched out his fingers, and like a bird does when digging with its beak, pinched and pulled towards him his bit of meat. The Arabs of 1835 were not yet familiar with knife and fork. I must say that I’ve never eaten such lamb. The stuffing from the belly was an especially marvelous thing.

The jackals and hyenas howled in despair to see such a fare pass before their snouts. Greedy hunger overcame their natural cowardice. Little by little they approached, and so close that they found themselves within range of my rifle. Two jackals and a hyena left their skins back there.

But these are only the bare facts. Following the facts comes reflection. I told myself that this way of cooking applied to rabbit ought to lead to something special. In 1836 I profited from the experience. The duc d’Orléans had invited me to spend a month at the Compiègne camp. I’d accepted on the condition that I’d stay anywhere else but at the château in order to preserve my complete independence and come and go as I pleased. I came down to Compiègne, to the Bell and Bottle Hotel.11 Then, from there, I got a good price from the widow of a warden living in Saint-Corneille and I settled down in the middle of the forest. But as quickly as I had passed through Compiègne, as little time as I had spent at the Bell and Bottle, I’d stayed there long enough to notice two things: the elegant disposition of the hotel’s interior court and the excellence of the kitchen.

I decided to share with the chef my recollections concerning the Arab mutton and with him experiment with this kind of cooking on rabbit. And so, here’s what I can offer you, dear readers, as the definitive result of our efforts. I will not tell you, as did my predecessor, the bourgeois cook, of her hare: “To roast a rabbit in its skin, first get a rabbit. Get a ferret, muzzle him, place your pouch or pouches in front of the burrow or burrows, and when your rabbit’s in the pouch, carry it, still alive, back home. Go with it into the kitchen, no matter how much repugnance the rabbit shows for the place. Pull it from the pouch by its back legs and give it its rabbit punch.” (See Arnal in La Dame de Choeurs.)12
Having stunned your rabbit, open it by its belly right away, draw out as much blood as you can, remove its liver, and with this liver, the blood, a chicken wing, two partridge wings, a truffle, a little sausage meat, some onion, parsley, garlic, and spices, make a hash into which you'll insert a bit of butter, salt, and pepper. Put it all back into the belly of your rabbit, so that it resembles, whatever its sex, a female ready to give birth. Hang your rabbit from the ceiling by its back legs in a cool place, free of humidity. Let it hang for thirty-six or forty-eight hours so that it will have time to flavor. Then, still in its skin, tie it to a skewer and turn it as you would an ordinary rabbit, only without basting it. It will baste itself from the inside out and naturally.

When you see that the rabbit's been cooked, from the little puffs of smoke that it tosses off, pull it or, rather, unfasten it from the skewer, take it in your left hand by its back legs, and with the right pull sharply by the tail. It will shed its skin all on its own. Serve over a bit of butter mixed with fines herbes. Look for the tender, young rabbits, and give it a try.

Some other day I'll talk to you about an omelet in tomato sauce and eggs scrambled in crawfish broth. Today I'm telling you: Go eat the lobster à la américaine I pray that God will preserve your good appetite, keep your stomach healthy, and prevent you from ever making literature.

A couple of days ago one of my friends wrote me to ask me for the recipe for real Neapolitan macaroni. So, I—who prides himself, as you have just seen, in being quite handy in the kitchen—I was going to be obligated to admit that I did not know the first thing about this recipe. What do you want? I don’t like macaroni. It's a taste I haven't acquired.

I remained in Italy for five years. I'd never been able to swallow a second mouthful. The result being that, not liking macaroni, I'd never troubled myself about how it was made. To get me out of this predicament, I wrote to Rossini.

Rossini was, I’d been told, a man who ate the best Neapolitan macaroni. Rossini replied with a charming letter inviting me to come have macaroni at his place, and promised, when I had eaten it, to give me the recipe.

I went to dine at Rossini's. But Rossini, seeing that I did not eat macaroni, judged me unworthy to cook it for anyone else. No matter how much I insisted, I could get nothing, with the result that, frankly speaking, if I believe anything, it's that Rossini is happy to eat macaroni, but it's his cook who makes it for him. From this day forward, may Rossini be content to be first among composers past, present, and future, and may he relinquish forever his reputation as a macaronista. 15

I was going to write to Carafa or ask my friend Home to raise the spirit of Lablache, when all of a sudden my door opened and the marquis de Grillo was announced. I don't have to tell you, surely, that the marquis de Grillo is the husband of Madame Ristori? 14

The marquis came in; I saw in him a savior, and I held my arms out to him. “Do you know how to make macaroni?” I asked him.

“No,” he replied, “but Madame Ristori, my dear friend, has heard of your predicament. Come have dinner with her on Monday, although she does have a benefit performance. We’ll be dining early, and I’ll introduce you to a virtuoso, casserole handle in hand, with far different capabilities than Rossini.”

“Bravo,” I said. “I’ll be at your place at three o’clock.”

Then, at three o’clock on the given day, I arrived at the marquis de Grillo’s. I found the artist at work. He had just put his macaroni in the pot; I didn’t miss, then, the slightest detail of his preparation. 13 Listen and remember well. Here is the real, the only, the unique recipe for Neapolitan macaroni.

Buy your macaroni at Bonsollazzi, rue d’Anjou-Saint-Honoré, 76. He sells the best macaroni in Paris. There are two kinds of macaroni: the large macaroni, that’s called in Naples strozza-preti, that is, priest choker, and the small macaroni, that’s called macaroncello. The macaroncello is more delicate, so I’ll recommend the macaroncello to you, although I’m not stopping you from choosing the priest-choker, if you prefer.

Here are the steps you’ll need to take for a dinner for twelve. If you want to dine at six in the evening, at eleven...
in the morning you will need to get: four pounds of top rump roast; a pound of smoked raw ham, four pounds of tomatoes, four large white onions, thyme, bay leaf, parsley, a garlic clove. Cook, stirring, for three hours. At the end of three hours, moisten with plain water until the highest part of the beef forms no more than a small island the size of a six-franc coin. Cook and reduce for four hours.

Then, boil your macaroncino in plenty of water. The water needs to be salted. Taste from time to time. Tear them in half. Over-cooked macaroni is worth nothing. It has to, according to the Neapolitan expression, cresca in corpo, that is, swell in its essence. The degree of cooking is a matter of sensibility. Even if you’ve spoiled it twice, you’ll succeed the third time. As soon as you consider the macaroni cooked, pull it from the fire and pour a carafe of cold water into the boiling water so that it will cook not one degree more. Then pour it into a colander to remove all the water.

You have your empty tureen, and around your tureen, your meat sauce, your grated parmesan, and your steaming macaroni. You need parmesan of the best quality. Go and ask M. Bonsollazzi. He’ll tell you where you have to buy it.

Take a handful of parmesan and with it cover the bottom of the tureen. On the layer of cheese, put a layer of macaroni. On the layer of macaroni, a layer of meat sauce; on the layer of meat sauce, a layer of macaroni; on the layer of macaroni, a layer of cheese; and so forth, alternating cheese, macaroni, meat sauce, macaroni, cheese. Then when the tureen is full, seal hermetically, and serve after ten minutes.

I hope that’s all clear, and that everyone now will be able to make macaroni. However, one of these days I’ll probably offer you a variation in the hope of improving it.

In the meantime, eat this one.

Bon appétit, dear readers!

NOTES


2. For a complete picture of Dumas’s journalistic activities as well as his other multiple publishing efforts, see especially F.W. Reed, A Bibliography of Alexandre Dumas père (London: J.A. Neuhoys, 1973).


5. The great nineteenth-century chef Marie-Antoine Carême was a pioneer of French haute cuisine and author of several foundational cookbooks. François Vatel (d.1671), the steward of the prince de Condé, reputedly fell on his sword when, among other misfortunes, the fish arrived late for the banquet he had organized for Louis XIV. Horace and Lucan were Roman poets; the former flourished during the reign of Augustus, and the latter, who wrote poetry insulting the emperor Nero and later entered into a conspiracy against him, found it prudent to end his life at the age of twenty-five.

6. Denis-Joseph Vuillenot, a pupil of Carême and identified as one of the "grands restaurateurs" in France by Dumas in the preface to his Dictionnaire, provided technical and editorial support during the initial drafting of the work and after Dumas’s death.

7. Alexandre Balthazar Grimaud de la Reynière, with his eight-volume Almanach des gourmands (1803–1812), lays claim to being the first journalistic critic of French haute cuisine. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin is to 1825. Louis Lahlache, Maurice Cousin, comte de Courchamps, wrote the Dictionnaire de la cuisine française ancienne et moderne (1859); La Cuisinière bourgeoise, first published in 1746, was one of the more popular cookbooks of the time.

8. Scostis was a legendary Pharaoh of Egypt who, according to Herodotus, invaded Europe. Cambyses II, the son of Cyrus the Great, expanded the Persian Empire into Egypt. The "celebrated" black broth of the Spartans (of which Leonidus was king) is mentioned in Plutarch’s Lives. "Boars stuffed with living birds" is a dish that appears at a banquet described by Théophile Gautier in his story "One of Cleopatra’s Nights" (1855).

9. Madame de Villefort poisons several of the characters in The Count of Monte Cristo before turning one of her recipes on herself.

10. Louis Philippe d’Orléans, also known as “the Fat” and head of one of the wealthiest families in pre-Revolutionary France, caused a scandal when he married his mistress, the actress Madame de Montesson, after the death of his first wife. His son by his first wife, Louis Philippe II, was known as Philippe Égalité during the Revolution for his anti-royalist sentiments, which did not prevent him from being guillotined in 1794.

11. Ferdinand Philippe d’Orléans was the oldest son of Louis-Philippe I, King of the French. He had an active military career but died in 1842 at the age of thirty-two in a coach accident. The “camps” were grand military maneuvers that were staged sixteen times at Compiègne from 1866 to 1874. L’Hôtel de la Cloche et de la Roullette where Dumas stayed (and which hosts a scene in The Count of Monte Cristo) now houses Le Musée de la Figure Historique.

12. Étienne Arnaud was a celebrated comic actor at the Vaudeville in Paris, the husband in Le Mari de la dame de choeurs (1857) being one of his signature roles.

13. Giacchino Rossini, who had moved to the Paris region permanently in 1859, had long since given up composing opera for, among other things, his culinary interests. In fact, considering Dumas’s often straitened financial circumstances, it was perhaps fortunate that Rossini failed to give him his favorite macaroni recipe: “Rossini bragged of his ‘maccheroni’ when he lived in Paris. They were actually bucatti, which he filled with goose liver, using a special silver-handled syringe that he had made for the purpose by a Parisian silversmith” (Oretta Zanini De Vita, Encyclopedia of Pasta [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 164).

14. Michele Carafa, an Italian opera composer originally from Naples, was professor of counterpoint at the Paris Conservatoire from 1829 to 1859. Luigi Lablache was a preeminent bass-baritone, celebrated for his roles in French and Italian opera, although of Irish-French heritage, he was born in Naples and died there in 1858. Daniel Douglas Home was a famous Scottish spiritualist who had been invited to Paris by the Empress Eugénie. Adelaide Ristori was an Italian actress who first performed in Paris in 1835 and for some time was considered the equal of the great French-Jewish actress, Rachel. In 1846 she married the Marquis Campanorina del Grillo.

15. In her memoirs Madame Ristori gives an account of what was likely another encounter between Dumas and macaroni: “Dumas boasted at our house that he could cook and season macaroni alla Napoletana as well as an Italian cook…The Count of Monte Cristo was perhaps fortunate that Rossini failed to give him his favorite macaroni recipe: "Rossini bragged of his ‘maccheroni’ when he lived in Paris. They were actually bucatti, which he filled with goose liver, using a special silver-handled syringe that he had made for the purpose by a Parisian silversmith” (Oretta Zanini De Vita, Encyclopedia of Pasta [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 164).