

Is Classical Cuisine still a selling point in upmarket restaurants in South Africa?

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Abstract

French cuisine often an elegant dining experience, at times somewhat rustic, and always highly palatable, has been for many years the ultimate cuisine for a young chef to master. Great role models such as Escoffier have for decades prompted the rise of new masters in the creation of French Cuisine. The reputation of the fare leaves many budding Jamie Oliver's feeling that they have something to strive for and to live up to. This article provides a brief insight into the history of French cuisine *per se*.

The 20th century brought about many changes in French. Traditional *haute cuisine* (*grande cuisine*) is the world-famous fare made famous by its subtle and delicate preparation and its precise presentation. It was essentially the main type of French food preparation until some food critics began to critique it for being far too impractical for modern gourmards and the public at large. The creation of New cuisine (*nouvelle cuisine*) in the 1970s was in essence a reaction to classic French cuisine. While many chefs consider the mastering of the art of French cooking to be the pinnacle of their culinary achievement, the extent to which the cuisine is currently appreciated in the 21st century is debatable.

Key words: Culinary style, classical cuisine, French cookery

INTRODUCTION

In my considerable years of service as a culinary educator in higher education institutions and as a consultant and adviser to International and National Culinary Associations and the hospitality industry in general, it is my humble and considered opinion that most Western societies consider French cookery to be the best way to prepare food. This is, I suppose, due to the *Grande Cuisine*, a style of cooking mostly offered in up-market restaurants and which is regarded as the National Cuisine of France. *Grand Cuisine* has established its world wide recognition because it focused on the pleasure of eating instead of just nutritional aspects. All cuisines include the pleasure part of eating but it was only in France, especially in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that a cuisine that focused on the pleasure of eating became socially institutionalized. It was the bourgeois class of the period that used this emphasis on eating for pleasure for their cultural development. Previously the aristocracy had determined the styles and fashions of the times, including the *Haute Cuisine*, but this privilege was lost with the French Revolution.

The middle class also used the *Grande Cuisine* to demonstrate a cultural superiority over the social groups with growing economic power and, thus, the potential to rise on the social ladder. At the same time,

restaurants-new and special places created for *Grande Cuisine*-came into being and were spatially institutionalized. The *Grande Cuisine* was transformed into a matter of public concern and considerable debate (Aron1973). In France, more than in any other European society, eating and drinking well came to symbolize the "good life"(Zeldin:1977).The *Grande Cuisine* became culturally important for all French classes This style of eating led to the description and the characterization of the French style of living as *savoir vivre*. Pierre Bourdieu's study, *La Distinction*, showed this phenomenon in relation to French society (1979).

Grand Cuisine became the model and the basis for an internationally renowned cuisine and was socially and culturally more valued than other regional or national cuisines. This perceived value reflected clearly in the prices charged in restaurants. French type of cuisine is not only associated with gourmet food but is also known to be the most expensive. The international dominance of the *Grand Cuisine* can be seen by the fact that the menu, the cooking methods the language, the organisation of the kitchen, and the training of cooks are all to a large degree based on French models.

The perception around the world is that the *Grand Cuisine* is a National Cuisine, not realising perhaps that there are several different French regional cuisines.

One can distinguish this social process with the *Grande Cuisine* and the regional cuisines. The former originated in an urban, aristocratic, and bourgeois environment: the latter represent rural and lower class cooking. They are not variations, one on the other, but opposites, each with different "cultural capital" (Bourdieu: 1979). The *Grand Cuisine* is considered to be well developed, refined, and luxurious; rural cooking is described as simple plain, and modest (Bonnain-Moerdyk: 1972). One might think that there are no better options than recipe collections and cookery books to reconstruct what in former centuries was considered delicious cooking. Such sources however, are inherently biased because only the wealthy classes could read and consequently, could not always have strictly followed recipes. There are no written reports about the cooking customs of the majority of the population.

In general, cookery books and recipe collections are examined historically for two reasons (Barlösius: 1992). One of them is to discover tendencies in the regionalization of cookery. In France this is apparent only from the nineteenth century onward because that the "upper classes began to take interest in regional folklore", and of course, this included an interest in regional cookery as well (Flandrin & Hyman: 1986:4). A second reason is to reconstruct long-term changes in cooking customs in order to discern process of cultivation and civilization (Look at the works of Jean-Louis Flandrin [1983, 1984, 1986])

The Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Century

The earliest known recipe collection is the "*Menagier de Paris*" from the fourteenth century.

The oldest known cookery book is the *Viandier de Taillevent*, published by Pierre Gaudol between 1514 and 1534. In both we can only find a few clues to the regional origins of the recipes and other instructions (Stouff 1982; Bonnet 1983; Laurieux 1986). Another resource, very famous and popular in Europe at that time was the cookery book *De Honestis Voluptate* (c 1475) by Platina (Bartolomeo Sacchi). Taken together these cookbooks give the impression that there was no regional or rural differentiation in cooking in Europe during the Middle Ages." Cookery books, regardless of who their readers might have been, diffused culinary models inspired more by aristocratic practices than by those of the common people, and were more cosmopolitan than regional" (Flandrin & Hyman 1986:4). The European aristocracy had, then, a common culture in eating and drinking and was not restricted by state borders.

Common European cooking traditions endured until the seventeenth century, when national cuisines began to develop. Before the seventeenth century cookery books and recipes were seldom published. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many cookery books appeared. The first of this series was *Cuisinier Francois* by François Pierre de la Varenne, published numerous times from 1651 until 1738. Other very influential cookery books were the 1656 *Le Cuisinier* by Pierre de Lune, the 1674 *L'Art de Bien Traiter* by L.S.R. François Massialot's *Le Cuisinier Royale et Bourgeois* (published 1691-1750), and *Menon's Nouveau Traite de la Cuisine* (1739).

These books described terms like *ancien* and *moderne*, which were also used to indicate changes in other arts. (Barlösius: 1988). The cookery of the Middle Ages was criticized as being rude whereas the new cookery was considered to be refined and cultivated. Culinary tastes had obviously changed. The cooks of the seventeenth century complaint about the medieval customs of cooking food too long and over-seasoning it. Spices like saffron, ginger, cinnamon, passion fruit seeds and mace were hardly used in the new cuisine but native herbs, such as chervil, tarragon, basil, thyme, bay leaves and chives became popular (Flandrin: 1986). The new culinary taste was also apparent in meat choices. During the Middle Ages the menu of the aristocracy consisted mainly of dishes with chicken or venison (Revel: 1979). Beef and pork were scarcely ever eaten. However beef was used in broth and soups. Other meats consumed seem exotic as for example, swans, storks, cranes, peacocks and large sea mammals. During the first decades of the seventeenth century recipes for big birds and sea mammals disappeared from the cookery books. Also out of fashion was the medieval penchant for realistic presentation. Cooked birds might be decorated with their feathers before being served. Beef and some pork dishes became trendy, but only those that used the most valuable and exquisite meat parts, such as fillets, loin, legs and hams (Flandrin: 1986). Until the nineteenth century it was common to serve food *à la française* which meant that many dishes were offered at the same time. It is true that the guests had a much greater choice than today, but many of the hot dishes were cold by the time they were served and people had the opportunity to eat them.

The Emergence of the Grand Cuisine in the Nineteenth Century

Haute cuisine was institutionalized in the *salle à manger* (dining room) of the aristocracy.

Alexander Dumas once complained that in the salons, commoners like Montesquieu, Voltaire and Denis Diderot discussed important social issues in a serious and enlightened fashion, but sophisticated cookery was available only to the aristocrats (Dumas: 1873:30).

It is noteworthy that in the second half of the eighteenth century, haute cuisine was one of the last cultural areas in which aristocratic taste still dominated (Barlösius: 1988)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Alexandre Grimod de la Reynière, in his book *Manuel des Amphitryon*, described standards of behaviour for aristocratic hosts (Grimod: 1808). Indispensable characteristics were wealth, good taste, an innate sensitivity, the desire to eat well, generosity, gracefulness, vividness, and a predilection for order. That money alone was not enough to run an excellent household could be observed again and again among the *nouveaux riches* (the "new rich") of the French revolution (Grimod: 1808).

The Change of the Grande Cuisine

In the nineteenth century the *bourgeois grande cuisine* was still detached from the traditions of the aristocratic haute cuisine, although not completely so, as shown in

recipes and food decoration. During this phase, the *grande cuisine* was influenced by Antonin Carême, said to be its founder, and by Antoine Beauvilliers, one of the first of the restaurant cooks (Beauvilliers 1814-16; Carême 1821,1843-8). Carême focused on the visual aspect of cookery and not much on food flavour. He also held to the service *à la française*, viewing as much elegant the *service à la russe*, which gaining popularity in restaurants. The latter corresponds mainly to today's style of service: The food is put on plates in the kitchen and served immediately to guests.

Two cookery books published later in the nineteenth century became very famous: These were Felix Urbain Dubois and Émile Bernard's *La Cuisine Classique* and Jules Gouffé's *Le Livre de la Cuisine*. Here the tension between artful food decoration and the development of flavour and taste was discussed, but no unanimous decision was arrived at (Gouffé1867; Dubois & Bernard 1874). Dubois and Bernard did not favour the service *à la russe* because for them, cookery had to appeal to all of the senses. They did however simplify food decoration.

The cooks of the *cuisine moderne* reacted to alterations in taste as well as to social changes. Auguste Escoffier, the most famous cook of that period, recommended that his colleagues study the tastes and habits of their guests and adapt their cookery to them with special attention to those tastes that had changed over the years (Escoffier: 1921). Ferdinand Point placed emphasis on the arrangement of side dishes while simplifying existing recipes and developing new ones (Point 1969). The *grande cuisine* has scarcely been concerned with the health aspects of food, but now cooks attempted to link pleasures of eating with foods that were healthy.

The *nouvelle cuisine* also accepted regional cookery traditions to an unprecedented extent. With this development the dominance of Parisian cuisine which had existed since the emergence of haute cuisine, was diminished. The nouvelle cuisine in restaurants was expensive, and only a few were able to afford it. The *grande cuisine* had begun to influence private cooking.

SOUTH AFRICAN CULINARY FARE-AN OVERVIEW

South African cuisine is today an amalgamation of the recipes from the many cultural groups that have co-existed in the country during the course of the last 360 years or so. Very little French cuisine is found anymore. The first known inhabitants of the country, The Khoisan, were mainly hunter-gatherers. Later, the Nguni peoples introduced agriculture to the country and planted maize, sweet potato, gem squash and other vegetables for their consumption.

The Dutch arrived in 1652, followed by the British in 1804, and they introduced sausage, which later on resulted in "*boerewors*" (farmer's sausage). The Cape Malays who were initially slaves at the Cape, introduced, bobotie. Stews, such as "*potjiekos*" were the creation of the Dutch Trekkers. The slaves, imported from the east (India and Malaysia) introduced curries, breyanis and other spicy foods to South African

dishes (DeWitt: 1998). The first Europeans in South Africa were the Portuguese explorers such as Bartholomew Diaz and Vasco da Gama, and they introduced fish dishes and peri-peri (red peppers) to the range of cuisines.

Today, the larger cities of South Africa have a wide selection of restaurants that specialise in Thai, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Mexican, Portuguese, French and other ethnic foods. French cuisine was highly sought after during the 1960-1980s period, especially in cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town, but this 'fad' gradually diminished so that today there are also many restaurants that serve traditional African local dishes. Traditional black dishes include 'pap' which maize meal porridge, or crumbly "phutu" pap. A large variety of savouries are used to accompany pap, such as spinaches and other green vegetables, which are flavoured with chilli. A dish called "*Umngqusho*" is by all accounts ex-President Mandela's favourite dish. This comprises of "stamp" mealies which a basically desiccated dried maize kernels, with potatoes, onions, sugar beans, butter, chillies and lemons, which are prepared by simmering them for a while. Another unique and very popular delicacy is the traditional dish called *Mashonzha*. This is the Mopani worm (caterpillar) that is cooked with chilli. Black South Africans also brew their own sorghum beer. It is very rich in vitamin B and is called "*Umqombothi*". Amongst especially the whites and coloureds, the braai (barbecue) dating back to the days of the Trekkers (1830s) is the country's favourite culinary pastime (Harris: 1998).

Another favourite dish in especially Afrikaner homes is the delicious "*waterblommetjiebredie*" stew. Meat is stewed together with a flower (the Cape Pondweed) which is common in the many dams and marshes of the Western Cape province. Bobotie is originally a Cape Malay dish consisting of minced meat cooked with brown sugar, apricots and raisins, milk-soaked mashed bread and curry flavouring. Tripe is also a favourite dish amongst especially black South Africans and it is considered to be a delicacy. South African fish such as sole, kingklip, snoek, red roman, hake etc are delectable to the palate and found in many family seafood restaurants. As far as desserts are concerned Melktert is the most famous South African dessert. It is puff pastry filled with a mixture of milk, flour and eggs and lightly flavoured with cinnamon sugar.

In 1994, the policy of apartheid ended and a multiracial government was elected under Nelson Mandela and since then. the economy has been adjusting to the new structure of society and this shift has also affected culinary tastes. There has been a marked shift away from Eurocentric foods such as french cuisine, although other European restaurants are still relatively popular. (<http://www.foodbycountry.com/Kazakhstan-to-South-Africa/South-Africa.html>)

CONCLUSION- French Cuisine today

In recent years it has become apparent that for many in South Africa and elsewhere across the globe, French cookery is no longer seen as the culinary standard, or even as the most refined cuisine. Cuisines, such as

those of Italy or Japan, are regarded as on an equal level. The future will show if another cuisine will replace that of France. In my opinion several different styles of national cookery have achieved acceptance as being perceived to be equally delightful and this is further changing as fusion style cookery is increasing across the globe. In South Africa,

A unique style of fare has emerged. So while French cuisine is a unique, cultural experience that blends flavourful food with beauty and leisure, and requires methodical preparation, it is sadly waning in acceptance in South Africa. French cuisine is undoubtedly an art to master, and it is an exceptionally artistic rendition of culinary fare at its very best and it is rather distressing to master chefs that its value is not appreciated as it should be in South Africa, but then South African food is also a special treat.

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