Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine
(review)
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REVIEW
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:
Krishnendu Ray
Gertrude Stein famously wrote, "[France] is a country where they talk about eating. Every country talks about eating but in that country they talk about talking about eating." (1973: 172) That idea provides ballast to Accounting for Taste. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson sets out to answer the question: why have the French dominated Western conceptions of haute cuisine? Her discussion implies it is misleading to seek the reason in the variety and freshness of French produce, the profusion of its regional cuisines or its terroir. As Albert Sonnenfeld (1987: 33) put it long ago, "The glorious diversity of French soil and produce, the cliché of France as 'the garden of Europe,' does not adequately distinguish France from Italy or, for that matter, from California."

Pascal Ory (1997) has convincingly argued that most Europeans, including the French, did not consider French food to be particularly good or trend-setting until the discourse crystallized in the 18th century. Ferguson contends it was only by the early 19th century, when the French invented the art of gastronomy, that the reputation of French food was fully established especially in conjunction with the print media. The crucial player here was Antonin Carême, the "King of Chefs and the Chef of Kings," who would rationalize French restaurant practices, aestheticize culinary discourse and nationalize both. "There were great culinary practitioners before Carême, but 'unfortunately for the culinary arts,' [as Carême noted] the great maîtres d'hôtel and chefs de cuisine in the 17th and 18th centuries never wrote 'even two lines.'" (Ferguson 2003: 42) Carême would eventually write his way out of the kitchen and into the book of gastronomes. Gastronomy is neither good nor fine cooking. "It is the establishment of rules (a nomos) of eating and drinking, an 'art of the table'… Ultimately, the gastronome is not the one who knows the most… but the one who speaks best… Gastronomy, it will emerge, can be seen as the reconciliation of two forms of orality" – i.e. eating and speaking (Ory 1997: 448-49).
But orality is as ephemeral as a dish. The stories have to be written down, replicated by way of print, thereby entering the field of cultural production, through the work of journalists, novelists and philosophers, to become a cuisine. *Accounting for Taste* develops that argument precisely and deliberately through the first three chapters, reaching its zenith by the middle of the book with a finely crafted chapter on "Food Nostalgia" by way of an analysis of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. What is remarkable is that along the way Ferguson also takes care of weighty sociological concerns: food work as art, craft or women's work; the rhetorical difference between cooking and "chefing;" and the complementary duality of tradition and modernity, authenticity and innovation, comfort and excitement, city and country. What is really impressive is that she covers so much theoretical ground without getting bogged down.

Yet, her answers are rarely facile as is hinted in the following comment: "Yet cuisine de femmes is not necessarily, primarily, or for that matter, even usually a negative ascription [in French discourse about haute cuisine], despite the many misogynistic comments we can dredge up to impugn the lesser culinary abilities of women." (2004: 132) Cooking is not "chefing." It is both more because of the affective ties of the cook—mother's cooking— but also less, much less, because of the domestic venue. Here Ferguson makes excellent use of Michel Foucault's understanding of the relationship between place and space—cuisine happens when cooking escapes the confinements of the domestic kitchen.

Ferguson draws on three other major theoretical sources. She develops Pierre Bourdieu's idea of a cultural "field" to denote the "gastronomic field;" and works with Michel de Certeau's appreciation of "making do" in everyday life, to undermine putatively fixed categories of gender, class and nation. At another level this text is a subtle illustration of Benedict Anderson's idea of an "imagined community"—in this...
rhetoric of family relations that makes social desirability biases very strong, since it is a sin to covet alternative relations. A better measure of the family economy of sectarians would be the rate of divorce. Viewed this way, the patriarchal economy is not as inviting. Women limit their career opportunities, do all of the housework, and have few opportunities outside of the sect. Early marriages, lower incomes, and egalitarian roles in the family generate conflict, as do higher demands for child rearing created by incessant monitoring and high fertility. These conflicts often lead to divorce, which is a source of ostracism from the community — and since the “home” is the woman’s sphere, the blame for divorce disproportionately rests on her. Patriarchy does seem like a good deal for men, just not for families.

Reviewer: Darren E. Sherkat, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois

Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine
By Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson
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