

## **Méditations de Gastronomie Transcendante**

*'on the other hand consider our adversaries...  
their stomach is their god and la cuisine their religion'*

Calvin

So much has been written about French cuisine that it is hard to imagine being able to contribute anything new to the centuries of reflection on eating and drinking, a pursuit brought to a particular and natural perfection in France. However, I was enchanted recently in a small Parisian bookstore, where I stumbled onto La Physiologie du Goût, a treatise on French cooking written by the 19th century master of the professional kitchen, Brillat-Savarin, the subtitle of which was Meditations on transcendental gastronomy. While the book itself was disappointing and self-indulgent, the subtitle provoked a series of meditations on the importance of eating and drinking well. For, if we are not to prove Calvin right in his dismissal of the French Catholics as depraved sensualists, it goes without saying that eating and drinking well is not merely a question of eating and drinking a great deal, nor merely eating and drinking those things that are most expensive or most difficult to find. No, if one is to take seriously the task of meditating on the transcendental aspects of the sensual delights, of which the pleasures of the table are but one, one is obliged to frame these delights in terms of philosophical enquiry. What is meant by a philosophy of the table? First of all, let us start by provisionally defining two very different philosophical approaches to *la cuisine*.

With the German aesthetic theorist Walter Benjamin as our authority, we can make use of the following simile. If one treats the cuisine as a locus of philosophical enquiry, 'its commentator can be likened to the chemist, its critic to an alchemist. While the former is left with wood and ashes as the sole content of his analysis, the latter is only concerned with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive.' We can therefore choose to look at cooking in the terms of the most elemental of philosophical oppositions, between Plato and Aristotle, as either realist or idealist. A realist commentator thinks in terms of recipes, of preparation, of calories, of quantities - the material facts of eating. An idealist critic thinks in terms of improvisation, of presentation, of ambience, of qualities - all that speaks to an immanent but impossible perfection. The unit of the realist is the dish, that of the idealist, the whole meal. I therefore propose to look at cooking from a critical perspective. How shall we plan our gastronomic journey? I propose we make use of what is at hand. It is Spring, we are in Paris, the cuisine is French, and our approach is that of the epicurean connoisseur in search of the ideal marriage of food, wine and festivity.

## French cuisine - a meditation on simplicity

*'Faites simple'*

Escoffier

If there is a single precept to be obeyed in the kitchen it is Escoffier's - keep things simple. This is a principle long established in philosophy, albeit not notably in Aristotle, to whom William of Ockham was responding, in part, when he contended that the Scholastics should shave a few axioms from their arguments, and that '*entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*' [propositions should not be multiplied unnecessarily].

The word simple is not at all a simple concept, and can have many meanings. Simple can mean a single element - a fresh egg, delicately poached, a limp stalk of asparagus with lemon and butter, a fresh oyster, the colour of emerald, glistening in its shell. Simple can mean that the ingredients are pure, fresh, and of high quality, chosen carefully in the early dawn marketplaces. Simple can mean unadorned or unornamented, although this is a very realist interpretation, and in the kitchen, as in life, keeping things simple is often a very complex affair. Ingredients should of course not be multiplied unnecessarily, and each element should retain its intrinsic character and form. Luckily the baroque excesses of the 19th century are a thing of the past, and only rarely does one encounter palaces made out of mosaics of truffle, egg white and pimento - food is no longer obliged to look like anything other than food. No less elaborate perhaps, is the beauty of separate elements on a plate - vivid green heads of fresh broccoli lying next to a bed of pearl-like white rice, contrasted by caramelised red bell peppers - can be justly called simple. Simple thus defined can mean 'pure in effect', as writer-chef Richard Olney puts it, whereby 'not only rustic cooking but also classical French cooking, with its refined methods and subtle harmonies, must, insofar as its integrity remains unmarred by sophistication, be admitted as well to the fold of simple food.'

Not only ingredients should be pure in effect, but so should the entire menu, for critically speaking, the true unit of gastronomic experience is not the ingredient, nor even the individual recipe, but the total experience that is the entire meal, from the aperitif, through a suite of carefully composed elements, each more complex than the last, to the post-prandial cognac. Far too often a series of excellent ingredients, each prepared according to excellent recipes, are combined one with the other without attention being paid to the overall effect - the result being a culinary confusion that clouds the senses and wearies the palette. Quails stuffed with foie gras followed by an elaborate egg-bound terrine, reaching its conclusion in a filet in pastry, each in and of themselves an

excellent thing, risks becoming banal, earthbound and merely excessive. Stripped of the delicate interplay of tastes and textures, one rich sauce following another, the meal becomes mere food, the alchemy mere chemistry, the magic, a cheap trick. A musical metaphor is perhaps not out of place here - whether the meal be thought of as a violin solo, a string quartet or a symphony, the total effect is a consequence of the orchestration of each of the separate elements into a single composition. Moreover, the more instruments required, the more carefully they must be orchestrated to prevent cacophony.

Richard Onley proposed the following definition of a meal, and I cannot imagine a better one. 'The essence of the thing is this: For a menu to emerge as a single statement, a coherent entity, it must be made up of single statements, each of which relates to the others by creating larger single (or simple - or harmonious) effects within the whole. Courses relate to each other, as well as each to its accompanying wine, and each wine is chosen not only in terms of its perfect fusion with a course, forming one statement, but as a harmonious prelude to the wine that follows it, forming another...' This is clearly an idealist position, in which the meal strives towards an inherent harmony, a perfection that celebrates each of the individual components by creating a larger whole that is itself the perfect expression of the meal. What does this mean in practical terms? Alchemy, unlike chemistry, has always been difficult and elusive to define, but certain guidelines can be given.

First of all, the palette must be constantly surprised. Each element of the meal must not only be distinct and distinguishable in terms of taste and texture - the crisp bite of the asparagus stalk, the voluptuous sweetness of the bell pepper, the melting foie gras, the rich and sensual texture of filet - but each must contrast and augment the other. Each course must be a delightful change from the one that preceded it, at the same time building to a crescendo from the light and simple, accompanied by light, crisp white wines, to the richer, simpler flavours of game or meat. The moment there is a danger of fatigue, the palette must be teased, surprised or coaxed into even greater anticipation. A champagne sorbet, tart more than sweet, helps revive the tastebuds before a change of register, as does the crisp green salad before the cheese course. The wines follow the overall plan of the meal, generally following the rule 'with a complex taste, a simple wine, with a simple taste, a complex wine, although generally each wine builds on the last, each more nuanced and interesting, building to the fullest-bodied of reds during the cheese course.

Second, the eye must be charmed. However carefully a suite of taste sensations is composed, its presentation must flatter the eye as well as the palette. Green vegetables

should never be served on a green platter, nor tomatoes jostle red peppers in a tomato sauce. Rustic dishes prepared in earthenware should be served in the vessels they were prepared in, while white porcelain sets off elegant sauces and sliced meat. As in the composition of the tastes, the visual composition of the meal should surprise, delight and flatter. The table setting itself should reflect the nature of the meal. Candies strewn across the white linen tablecloth make an informal meal more festive, while silver napkin rings and Georgian candlesticks give the meal a pleasant formality, the play of candlelight on the silver creating an unforgettable setting. No element can be forgotten if the entire meal is to transcend the ordinary and become an event loved and remembered. Eating is among the supremely social acts of human communion - eating, drinking, analysing and sharing a common gastronomic experience. The table is thus the theatre of life, and as such deserves careful attention to the stage setting.

Third, the parts must never overwhelm the whole. No matter how delicious a single element, or a single ingredient - truffles, foie gras, pistachios - it must never be allowed to eclipse the entire meal. Just as it is in bad taste for a soloist to overshadow the orchestra, it is equally tasteless to allow a single course to ruin the overall structure of an entire meal. Moreover, just as a single element can overwhelm a meal, a meal should not be allowed to sombre in a single repetitive theme. If there are mushrooms in the fish course, there shouldn't be mushrooms to the meat sauce; if the main course is veal in a cream sauce, avoid whipped cream with dessert, however sweet your tooth may be. Don't order rice with the fish, then potatoes with the meat, or a Gruyère gratin followed by the same cheese on the cheese platter. For all Ravel's mastery, eating the gastronomic equivalent of the Bolero would tire even the most avid palette.

Finally, it is important to keep the philosopher's critical stance, a certain distance from the entire experience - as the French say, one must leave the table still hungry. This applies on both the earthly and the philosophical plane. Whether cooking for oneself, or for friends, or being entertained at a private home or fine restaurant, all the five senses, as well as the mind, must be engaged with the meal if the entire experience is to be fully appreciated. A meal is a concerto in which not only the sensual delights must be allowed to sway the heart, but the inherent beauty of the meal's structure must woo the spirit with its intelligence, finesse and clarity.

## **French wines - a meditation on harmony**

*'the smell of wine, how it is fresh, laughing, plaintive,  
more celestial and delicious than oil'*

Rabelais

Like honey for Winnie the Pooh, wine for the critical thinker remains in its fundamental aspects a mystery. Chemically wine is but the simple consequence of the fermentation of any combination of the over 3000 varieties of the European grape, *vitis vinifera*, of which only some two dozen have been designated as 'noble'. Nevertheless, the result defies precise description, and has inspired volumes of commentary without even beginning to exhaust the possible discourse about its qualities. Like fine art, the appreciation of fine wine has two equally important aspects. On the one hand it is intensely personal, and on the other, intensely social. Like art, wine can be appreciated immediately, and the taste of a particular wine can transport the memory to past times, past summers, past experiences. The uncanny ability of a wine to register every nuance of the soil and weather that went into its making is unparalleled. Also like fine art, much of the pleasure of fine wines consists of tasting, describing and sharing impressions with friends and connoisseurs. And, as with art, to know more about the conditions of a wine's creation is to more fully appreciate its complexity and its particularity, to enter into a discourse at once both sensual and intellectual. Any wine can be perfect of its kind. Wine is eternally aspiring to an ideal imagined state, but every year redefines what constitutes perfection for a particular combination of sun, soil, and vinification.

Often what is written about wine often seems at first glance to be impossibly pretentious - an elaborate language in code, seemingly meant to keep the vulgar and uneducated from sharing in the pleasures of fine wines. It seems hard to imagine that such language is anything but a smokescreen, veiling what is in effect a simple thing - after, wine is only wine, is it not? Luckily, the tongue is a finely tuned instrument, and it does not take long to convince oneself that wines can and do differ enormously - from region to region, from château to château, from year to year. A wine made from the grapes in a field a few hundred metres up a hill in Pauillac, where the soil may be chalkier, the slopes slightly sunnier, can taste vastly different from its next-door neighbour. It does not take long to convince even the least experienced palette that the seemingly baroque and anthropomorphic language used to describe wine - its 'nose', its 'legs', its 'back' - each describe very specific aspects of the wine, and that far from being the elite preserve of a chosen few, these aspects can be tasted by everyone. For this discussion of wines, I will pass temporarily from the idealist stance taken with the meal to the empiricist, even skeptical position that would have all knowledge pass through the senses. To follow me in this analysis start with a bottle each of a Beaujolais (a Brouilly, a Juliéna, a

Chiroubles), a Côte du Rhone (Crozes Hermitages, St. Joseph, Châteauneuf-du-Pape) and a Bordeaux (Médoc, Haut-Médoc, Pauillac, 1989 or earlier). We are now ready to explore some of the red wines of France.

As there has been so much written about the finer points of choosing and tasting wines, I would like to dwell on three specific aspects of wine that provide us with the basis from which every connoisseur will build his or her own fund of experiences depending on their own tastes. Starting with the three wines above, you can taste for yourself the difference, and begin to appreciate the importance of region, grape variety and weather on the individual wine.

First, the region. France is divided into dozens of wine-growing regions, and each of these regions is divided into areas (often suffixed as '-villages') and smaller areas, 'appellations contrôlées', each appellation comprising in some cases hundreds of châteaux. Foremost among these regions are the Bordeaux, stretching along the rivers Garonne and Dordogne that flow into the Atlantic, Burgundy, which flanks the river Rhône just south of Dijon to just north of Lyon, and the Côtes du Rhône, which straddles the upper reaches of the Rhône. Each of these regions produces wines that can be readily distinguished from one another, as they are each produced from different grape varieties and different soils.

The wines of the Bordeaux are considered by many to be the most sophisticated of the French reds. On the tongue they are velvety, their flavours develop as the wine is tasted in different parts of the mouth, there are hints of berry flavours, of spices, of fruit. Drinking a vintage Bordeaux, a Pauillac from one of the great vintages perhaps, is like reading a novel on the tongue; the flavours first define themselves individually, then combine in endless combinations, each one recalling the flavours of the earth, the wild berries and the sun. If the wine is ready to drink, which is to say that the astringent puckering caused by the tannins in the maturing wine have mellowed with sufficient aging, tasting a great wine is one of life's sublime experiences. In a lesser register, you will readily taste the finesse in a young Bordeaux such as the Médoc or Pauillac; if of good quality, its character will already be present with only three or four years of aging, if a great vintage, present in sketch form, like a portrait ready to be filled in.

The principal grape varieties used in the Bordeaux are cabernet-sauvignon, cabernet franc, and merlot, with the occasional addition of a small percentage of the tannic petit-verdot. The proportions of each grape vary from château to château, which is what distinguishes the wines of the various appellations: Médoc and Graves have an average of two-thirds cabernet-sauvignon, with the remainder being Merlot, in Pomerol and St.

Emilion, Merlot dominates, with cabernet franc second, the remainder cabernet-sauvignon. The Bordeaux also produces some excellent white wines, notably the dry white Graves, and the voluptuous desert wines of Sauternes, Barsac and Loupiac.

The northern and southern reaches of the Rhône valley are distinct - in landscape, soils, and vines. In the south the dominant grape is grenache, although in the Châteauneuf-du-Pape, one of the largest and most well-known appellations, some thirteen different varieties are grown and blended in different proportions, producing a wine that is full-bodied and coarse, with a wild and gamy edge coming from the Syrah grape that marries well with rabbit and other wild game. Further north the appellations of Cornas, St. Joseph, Crozes-Hermitage and Hermitage each produce full-bodied and coarse red wines, excellent with red meat or spicy foods. The white wines of this region, less well-known than their red counterparts, are excellent when drunk young with vinaigrettes and garlicky provençal cuisine that would overwhelm more delicate wines.

The northern Rhône, the Côte d'Or and the Beaujolais, produce red wines that are markedly different to their cousins to the south and to the west. The main body of Burgundy extends from just south of Dijon to just north of Lyon, and the principal grapes are the pinot noir and the gamay noir. At the southern end is the Beaujolais region, whose vineyards produce fresh, light-bodied wines meant to be drunk young. When the wines of the region are blended they are sold as generic Beaujolais or Beaujolais villages (the Beaujolais primeur, hastily fermented from the year's growth and put on the market in mid-November has become more a media event than the launching of a young drinkable wine) and in general it is wiser to buy the wine of one of the nine specific community appellations: St. Amour, Chiroubles, Chiroubles, Juliéna, Brouilly.

The greatest wines of the Burgundy region come from the Côte d'Or, a strip of hillsides some fifty kilometres in length divided into the Côtes de Beaune and the Côtes de Nuits. The wines of the greatest complexity and depth come from the Côte de Nuits, followed by Vosne-Romanée, Vougeot and Chambolle-Musigny. The characteristics of these wines have been described by two centuries of critics, and it is hard to add any new adjectives to the list, let alone criticise. Majestic, spicy, majestic - the scents of violets, of cherries, of licorice, of wild mint - all this abounds in descriptions of Vosne-Romanée, La Romanée-Conti and Romanée-La Tâche. The microclimate of this narrow strip of France continues to provide rich ground for wine connoisseurs' imaginations to take root and flourish.

Second, the château. A château is a vineyard or growth generally belonging to one person or one company. Although château means castle in French, not every château can be said to have an accompanying castle or country house, although in fact this is often the case. In the Bordeaux, a single château can be many times bigger than an entire appellation in the Burgundy. Château Lafite-Rothschild, one of the Bordeaux best-known châteaux is over two hundred acres. Romanée-Conti, its counterpart in the Côte de Nuits, is only five. The quality of a wine can be said to vary inversely with the amount generated per hectare - the more wine per hectare, the lesser the quality. 'The vines must suffer' to produce good wine say the winemaker. Making the vines suffer means cutting back the grape clusters in the spring and summer, retaining only the sturdiest and fullest for harvesting in the autumn. Making the vines suffer also means that the rich soils of the river plains generally make flat and undistinguished wines, while the vines that have to struggle to find water in the chalky soils of the rocky hillsides tend to produce wines of great complexity and finesse, wines that taste mysteriously of blackberries and of peppery spices. The appellation 'Graves', for instance, means gravel, and refers to the stony hillsides on which this wine is grown.

Although the wines from a specific region all tend to share the same family resemblance due to their proximity, individual châteaux within a region often can be surprisingly different one to another, depending on the exposure, the soil, and the method of vinification. Some wines are aged in new oak barrels (to impart additional tannin, which helps the wine age), others in old used tuns, still others in stainless steel. Château Mouton-Rothschild may be said to embody the ideal Pauillac happily inhabiting some Platonic celestial realm of perfect things, even neighbouring châteaux, such as Lafite-Rothschild, bordering on St. Estephe do not always share its muscularity and power, but are delicate and nuanced.

Third, the vintage. The vintage is the year in which the grapes were grown and harvested. Drinking a fine wine can be compared to reading a novel on your tongue. A fine wine unfolds progressively as it passes from the tip of the tongue, its bouquet filling the mouth, finally finding its way to the back of the throat, revealing new tastes as it is swallowed. Every mouthful reveals something of the particular odyssey of its making, which for a wine, is a history of the year's weather. The year, therefore, is of critical importance to the overall taste of the wine. The same Château will produce very different-tasting wine depending on the year. In a good year, the rain is moderate and falls at night, the days are sunny, and the grapes swell to perfection before they are picked in a dry autumn harvest. The roots of the vines plunge deep in the soil to find moisture, and produce robust clusters with plenty of tannin in the stalks and skins. Some vintages have proved to be legendary, and the complexity of the best wines of

these years can astound even experienced wine connoisseurs. Only a dozen or so years in the past two centuries have produced these bigger-than-life wines, and since 1929, only 1945 and 1961 have turned out to be what Olney calls 'slumbering giants'. In the Bordeaux, 1989 was almost perfect, a dry harvest following a long hot summer, and the wines from this year are round and full-bodied. On the other end of the scale, certain years have been wine-making disasters - cold, wet, the grapes picked late and in the rain. Even so, good wine can be produced in these years by experienced winemakers, although it will tend to be lighter-bodied, lighter in colour, and will be ready to drink much earlier. As a good rule of thumb, if you buying for your own wine cellar, it pays to buy wines from great châteaux in minor vintages, and lesser châteaux in the great vintages.

Unless you are a professional wine taster, unwilling to sully the palette with anything that would alter the wine's taste, you will be drinking wine with meals, as wine adds a dimension to the gastronomic dialogue that can lift a meal from the spartan to the sensuous. However, to best appreciate the subtleties of the wine, the more complex the wine, the more simple and uncomplicated should be the meal that it accompanies. Moreover, in order to truly blossom, the strong, tannic wines of the Bordeaux should be decanted before serving, to eliminate any sediment (which can be quite substantial in wine that is 20 or 30 years old) and to allow it to 'breathe'. The exact time a wine should be allowed to breathe is a subject of vociferous debate, and varies from wine to wine. As a rule of thumb, for an old Bordeaux, an hour to two hours is usually about right. If you are ordering an old wine at a restaurant, they will probably suggest that it be decanted first, if not, you can ask them to do so. In any event, order old wines early, so they will have time to breathe before they are served.

Finally, given the capital importance of wine in the overall structure of the meal, what wine should accompany the meal? From the outset we must not take what are in effect suggestions honoured by long tradition as absolute rules. According to Rabelais, Gargantua laid down one rule for the Thelemites 'DO WHAT YOU WANT - because free men, well-born and well educated, consorting in honest company, have by their nature an instinct that always urges them to virtuous deeds, and leads them from vice...' So there are no fixed rules - every wine/food marriage is dictated by the tongue and the overall intent of the menu. As a rule of thumb it is often said that red wines should accompany red meat and white should accompany fish and white meats. But who would reject a fine red wine with a pheasant salmis, or a fresh young beaujolais with a fresh-caught salmon? It is often said that the wine used in a sauce should accompany the dish, but again, who would willingly drink a white wine with beef braised in white

wine? More important is to recognise the complexity of the wine, and to take the time to savour it.

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