

## Consuming Culture, Constructing Identity :

A Review Essay of Food Culture in France, by Julia Abramson  
(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007)

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This book is written as a basic introduction to French food culture for an American audience; as such, it inevitably contains a lot of information that is simply taken-for-granted, every-day-stuff for the French. The chapter on “Major Foods and Ingredients”, for example, informs us that bread is generally not made at home but sold in “boulangeries”; not earth-shattering news for the Parisian who stops at the corner “boulangerie” every day on her way home from work.

However, to stop there and shelve the book alongside other “English guidebooks of French food” would be a shame because, as it turns out, there is much more to it than basic French food facts and vocabulary. First of all, the book (like the series to which it belongs) explores the culture of food and eating; an objective the author takes seriously. Within this frame, there are also sections and organizational aspects of the book that are useful for the French reader. Secondly, read from an anthropological perspective, the book provides us with something more than its content alone. In the second part of this paper, we will step away from a straightforward review of the book as academic text, and consider it, and the series to which it belongs, as cultural artifact. Understood as such, they allow us to reflect and comment on their larger context; namely, the United States and its relationship to food.

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The author of this book, Julia Abramson, is someone whom we have already met here in France; and, more specifically, here on this website. I am thinking in particular of her keynote presentation at a conference entitled *Gastronomie et Identité Culturelle Française: Discours et représentations, XIXe-XXIe siècles*, which took place in Paris in the spring of 2005.<sup>1</sup> This time around, however, Abramson is not writing for other academic specialists of French gastronomy, but trying to reach a more general American public. Though her audience and objectives have changed, we recognize Julia Abramson’s strengths as both writer and researcher. I hope the reader will agree: no matter what the subject, basic introductions can sometimes be pretty dry (which might be good when it comes to wine but not so good when it comes to books). Abramson, on the contrary, does an excellent job of condensing an enormous amount of material and information into a series of easily digestible points and highlights that are read with ease and enjoyment.

This is all the more impressive an achievement when one considers that Abramson was working with two important constraints; since this book is part of a larger series of “comprehensive interdisciplinary reference volumes” on “Food Cultures around the World”, Abramson needed to draw on material from across disciplines and follow the same organizational format as the other works (Introduction, Historical Overview, Major Foods and Ingredients, Cooking, Typical Meals, Eating Out, Special Occasions and Diet and Health).

Abramson does an admirable job on both fronts. She draws from a wide range of sources (history, literature, sociology, anthropology, newspapers, cookbooks, etc.), and includes French sources alongside the English language ones. She chooses judicious

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<sup>1</sup> A review of this conference can be found on this website. In addition, Abramson’s paper is now available in a collection of the conference’s papers (see Hache-Bissette and Saillard 2007). A review of this publication can also be found on this website.

spaces to include and develop important points within the standardized format (without repeating herself in the process). The lists of films (and to a lesser extent, websites) in the annex are extensive.

As can be expected with a standardized format, the quality of the work does vary a bit in accordance with the author's expertise<sup>2</sup>. Sections devoted to historical analyses benefit greatly from Abramson's knowledge of French history and literature (her areas of specialization); they have comprehensive bibliographies and interesting, multi-dimensional discussions. Other sections, especially those pertaining to contemporary food habits, could benefit at times from additional development and bibliographic input.

Let's begin with a look at a chapter that clearly reflects the weight of her training. In the first chapter, "Historical Overview", we are given a summary that is both vast and concise: vast, because it begins at the "Origins" – in other words, with the hunter-gatherers who lived in what is now known as France around 6000 BC - and ends with a section on "France and Europe" in the present day; concise, because she covers this history of French humanity in a mere 40 pages. Suffice it to say, she concentrates on the essentials; the chapter is full of tight, precise phrases that summarize key periods in France's culinary history. And yet she does this without losing touch with textured details and anecdotes that anchor the reader's interest and give depth to her account.<sup>3</sup>

Let's take, for example, her discussion of "Classical Cooking" in this first chapter. In this section, she begins by drawing largely on 17<sup>th</sup> century cookbooks to illustrate a few of the advances made during the period towards the development of modern tastes (i.e. a decrease in the use of spices) and haute cuisine (i.e. codified kitchen procedures). She then introduces "service à la française" to nuance her discussion by identifying it as point of continuity with the past and then uses it to begin a section on food and social structure at the court of Louis the XIV. More than simply cite sources or list facts, she also tells stories and introduces characters. For example, she tells us about the chef Vatel (of the ultimately ill-fated feast he prepared for Nicolas Fouquet as well as Vatel's own mythical "failed-fish-delivery" suicide at the Chateau de Chantilly) and describes Molière's Tartuffe; both stories giving way to interpretations that illustrate the weighty "dramas of power" that were enacted through food in this specific cultural context. Abramson finishes off the section by using cookbooks and finishing school training manuals to discuss the influence of Catholicism at the time as well as larger social changes under way (in particular, the rise of the bourgeoisie). And this is just one small section of the chapter<sup>4</sup>.

This kind of richness is felt again in other areas of the book that focus on historical accounts. For example, in the chapter on "Cooking", she includes a section on the development of the culinary profession and the restaurant, the star status that a few chefs enjoy today and the long standing attention gastronomy receives in the media. Of particular interest in this section is Abramson's discussion of "Women Chefs". As Abramson points out, women are largely absent from (if not subject to open hostility from) the all-male world of the professional chef, long noted for its "macho culture and inhospitable climate" (p. 95). Here, Abramson introduces a brief discussion of a small group of "chef-proprietors" known since the end of the eighteenth century as "mères" (mother). An interesting category, in that

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<sup>2</sup> Other works in the series apparently exhibit the same variability (Freeman 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, the chapter would make an excellent guide for any professor – French or American – set on teaching students about the history of French cuisine and gastronomy. References to various primary source materials (i.e. cookbooks, guides, newspapers) as well as a wide range of French films (from the 1930s to the present) offer up excellent ideas for class material and discussion.

<sup>4</sup> There is one small, but noticeable error in this chapter: Astérix is not rotond, his side-kick Obélix is...

some of these “mères” have even been awarded one or more Michelin stars yet, as their name indicates, have continued to be distinctly separate from the world of the professional male chef.

As stated earlier, other sections of the book are weaker in terms of sources and development. Chapter 2 on “Major Foods and Ingredients” leaves the French reader, in particular, hungering for more. Here we find one page dedicated to bread, another to wine, a third to cheese, and so on through a surprisingly exhaustive list of the foods eaten in France. This chapter is the one that comes closest to an “English guide to French food”. The bread section, for example, includes a first paragraph which mentions the power of bread as a religious symbol and its appearance in numerous French sayings (*gagne-pain*, etc.), but the rest of the section is mostly devoted to a description of the different kinds of bread one can find in the bakery. This most certainly reflects the knowledge-level, interests and expectations of her audience, yet I feel that it misses the mark a bit when it comes to conveying the significance of these products in a country where so much stress is put on products’ quality and culinary characteristics as well as their historical and cultural import. However, we should add that additional discussion of a few of these products is found in other chapters: wine, for example, appears in several other places in the book.

Similarly, relatively few sources are provided for Chapter 4 (Typical Meals), 5 (Eating Out) and 6 (Special Occasions). There is sociological and anthropological work available in France (and the United States) on many of the topics covered in these chapters. The “Typical Meals” chapter, for example, refers to the form and function of the family meal in France, as well as the development of such activities as snacking and taste education. While the information given in these sections is accurate, they are missing the depth they could have if additional sources were consulted.

The last chapter on “Diet and Health” contains a nuanced discussion of “Balance, Moderation and Pleasure” as well as “The French Paradox”, both areas where trans-Atlantic clichés can sometimes cloud or color analyses. Likewise, sections on “Problems on Abundance” and “Food Safety” introduce debates on obesity, AOC labeling and GMOs; giving a good sense of current preoccupations in France as well. The small section on breastfeeding, on the other hand, seems to be taken mostly from conversations with French friends and offers a few remarks on the topic that reflect personal experiences rather than general practice.

In summary, despite the lack of development apparent in certain sections, the book is a good introduction for the American novice, and perhaps for the American undergraduate student in particular. For the French reader, the book is interesting because it allows for the discovery of an array of English language sources (and perhaps a rediscovery of a few French ones) and provides a well-written summary of key periods in French culinary history.

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As mentioned above, this book is the latest addition to a series devoted to the study of « Food Cultures around the World ». Twelve works precede it, each focused on a particular country or region (in order of publication) : Japan (Ashkenazi and Jacob 2003), the Near East, Middle East and North Africa (Heine 2004), the United Kingdom (Mason 2004), China (Newman 2004), Italy (Parasecoli 2004), India (Sen 2004), the Caribbean (Houston 2005), Mexico (Long-Solis and Vargas 2005), South America (Lovera 2005), Russia and Central Asia (Mack and Surina 2005), Spain (Medina 2005) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Osseo-Asare 2005)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> All the books in this series (published by Greenwood Press in Westport, CT) share the same title, “Food Culture in X”.

According to series editor Ken Albala, this series “marks a maturation of the discipline of Food Studies”<sup>6</sup>. In some ways, it is part of a larger trend in the United States towards an interest in things culinary. For, in fact, though the French tend to associate the United States solely with the development of fast food and obesity, there has also been what many Americans consider to be a culinary revolution under way for at least a good fifty years now; a revolution that many feel started in earnest with the arrival of Julia Child on the cooking scene (who took it upon herself to patiently and painstakingly prove to middle class America that they could cook like the French, and that it was fun and delicious to do so). This revolution was also influenced by the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and tends to be centered in urban areas, among the middle and upper classes, though certain aspects of it have spread outside these geographical and social boundaries as of late.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the appearance of this book series attests to that fact: for Albala, it is written for a “wider audience of students, general readers and foodies alike”<sup>8</sup>.

The terms “students” and “general readers” are easy enough to understand. “Foodie”, on the other hand, is a culturally specific term that needs some extra consideration here. The term “foodie” references the growing number of Americans who have an avid interest in food and eating. Though relatively few Americans identify themselves as “foodies”, a much larger number participate in diverse ways in what we might call “foodie” culture. In this way, the American “foodie” is similar to the French “gastronome”; though few French people outright identify themselves as “gastronomes”, a large number certainly participate in various ways in French gastronomic culture. We will briefly consider the terms “foodie” and “gastronome” as “ideal types” that reflect key aspects of each society’s relationship to food and eating.

According to the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, the term “foodie” came into common use in 1982 (which reflects the relative newness of an American interest in things culinary). *Food and Fitness: A Dictionary of Diet and Exercise* defines a “foodie” as :

*A person who takes pleasure in the preparation, presentation and eating of food. The term is sometimes used in a pejorative sense to describe someone who is always searching for new, exotic taste sensations.*

In short, like the French “gastronome”, the American “foodie” takes a “pleasure in the preparation, presentation and eating of food”. However, as the above definition also suggests with its mention of “exotic taste sensations”, there are also some profound differences in the manner in which “foodies” and “gastronomes” relate to their foods.

Already the terms themselves - “foodie” and “gastronome” – reflect differences in cultural attitudes towards the pleasures of the table. Why, for example, did Americans (or the portion of the American upper and middle classes that took an interest in culinary culture) not simply adopt the term “gastronome”? After all, it would not have been the first time Americans use a French term when it came to the kitchen (*gourmet, cuisine, soufflé, hors d’oeuvre...*). My instinct tells me instead that the term “gastronome” simply sits wrong with many Americans. “Gastronomes” are interested in “gastronomy”, the serious art and science of food, which is often linked to a search for (class) distinction (or French snobbery) in the American context. “Foodie”, on the other hand, rings on an entirely different register. “Foodie” is topped off with an -ie ending, like “groupie” - or “cutie” - that renders the term

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<sup>6</sup> Series Foreword.

<sup>7</sup> This is not the place to trace the development of this revolution. See Levenstein 1988 and 1993 for further information.

<sup>8</sup> Series Foreword.

accessible, affectionate and fun. A “foodie” is foremost a (food) fan - an enthusiast, a spectator – rather than a critic. “Foodie” sounds a bit democratic: anyone can be a “fan” (even if, of course, in practice this may not be the case). This doesn’t mean, of course, that “foodies” do not take their eating seriously. Au contraire! But it does mean that some of the basic attitudes and values that back up their relationship with food are quite different from those of their French counterparts.

That is not to say, that the American “foodie” and the French “gastronome” do not share a few common traits as well. Most striking among these is their quest for “authenticity”: authentic ingredients, authentic cuisines, authentic restaurants, authentic producers, authentic experiences.... In addition, in both cases, this authenticity is tied to notions of tradition, naturalness, purity and good health (among others). More importantly, for both, food is something much more than mere nourishment. It is a means to represent and reinforce an identity. In short, this search for “authenticity” is, among other things, a means to reinforce or (re)invent the social and cultural identities they feel are in danger of disappearing in these rapidly changing times.

Of course, the places to which the French and Americans attribute “authenticity” are quite different. As the definition cited above suggests, the American “foodie” is interested in “ethnic” tastes and cuisines. So the “authentic” food and culture is often located outside the national borders (or within them, but representing various immigrant – once foreign - communities). Meanwhile, while an Asian flair may touch the tables of France with the integration of ginger or bean sprouts into any number of dishes, the main thrust of the French “authenticity” movement is the French region and its “terroir”. Indeed, the French book series that comes closest to resembling this American series is the *Inventaire culinaire du patrimoine de la France* (1992-1996): a 22 volume collection dedicated to the exploration of the products, cuisines, histories and cultures of the different regions of France<sup>9</sup>.

The American and French series resemble each other in numerous ways. Both series are written for a general audience (and perhaps “foodies” and “gastronomes” in particular). They both take a multi-disciplinary approach: drawing from history, geography, anthropology and so on. They both are organized according to spaces that are defined as having specific food cultures: specific countries and world regions in the case of the US and the French regions in the case of France. The goal of both series is to relate an understanding of food as an important part of a (harmonious?) cultural whole. In addition, the existence and livelihood of these cultural wholes are understood to be threatened by the forces of globalization. Both the French and American series provide “culinary inventories” meant to preserve and protect “local” foods and cultures thus threatened. In the “Series Foreword” to the American collection, Ken Albala writes: “*As globalization proceeds apace in the twenty-first century it is also more important than ever to preserve unique local and regional traditions.*”

Finally, both series include a more “tour-guide-like” aspect, providing the names of products, recipes for traditional dishes, and so on. The French series goes perhaps one step

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<sup>9</sup> The new French movement known as “le Fooding” resembles the American “foodie” movement in more than just linguistic terms; for example, they also give a particular attention to “exotic” cuisine, novelty and ambiance. We do not consider the movement here because it is not concerned with “authenticity” in the same manner. “Le Fooding” aims to reinvigorate (even reinvent) French gastronomy with, among other things, the assimilation of exotic influences and a breaking down of the tradition-bound rules and structure of the field. For further information see their website at [www.lefooding.com](http://www.lefooding.com) (Abramson also refers to the movement on page 133-4). Nonetheless, we do note here that the face of food and cuisine is more complex in both countries than we have room to discuss here. “Le Fooding” attests to this in France as does the American regional cooking movement in the United States.



further with this as it provides addresses as well. This is an important aspect of these works and one that differentiates them from other reference collections. The products and practices talked about in these books are to be consumed by the reader. In other words, these guides not only aid the modern eater in his search for authenticity, but, more importantly, in his search for identity. To learn about, talk about and finally purchase, prepare and eat authentic “terroir” food in France is also about feeling connected both to that place and its people as well as to the French nation as a whole. Likewise in the United States, eating “foreign” cuisines is often about eating “immigrant” cuisines and so also reinforcing an understanding of what it means to be part of an “immigrant community”, and, by extension, part of the United States, a.k.a The Melting Pot.

However, though these series can be understood as part of a larger authenticity movement that acts to reinforce a sense of belonging to both local and national communities, we also need to note that to represent and consume national regions (spaces that are already an integral part of the national “patrimoine”, or heritage) is not the same as representing and consuming other countries and world regions (spaces that are not part of the nation, even for those - like Italy or Mexico - that have important communities in the United States). In other words, the worldviews (the way we envision the world and our place within it as “we” and “them” and as “now” and “then”) implied by these two series are quite different. In the case of the French series, the French region, like French identity, demands protection and preservation. Globalization, in this case, is seen as an invasion from the outside (i.e. usually from the United States or Europe). For the American series, however, it is other countries or world regions that demand protection and preservation. Ken Albala writes in the Series Foreword:

*In many cases these books describe ways of eating that have already begun to disappear or have been seriously transformed by modernity. To know how and why these losses occur today also enables us to decide what traditions, whether from our own heritage or that of others, we wish to keep alive. These books are thus not only about the food and the culture of peoples around the world, but also about ourselves and who we hope to be.*

In her book entitled, Exotic Appetites, American philosopher Lisa Heldke differentiates between cultural imperialism and cultural colonialism. The first, according to Heldke is “the imposition of cultural practices by an economic or political power”; the second refers to “the appropriation of such practices by such a power” (Heldke, p xviii). One wonders, then, if such a series reflects not only a rise in an interest in food and cuisine in the United States, but also the current (political, economic, social and cultural) position of the United States in the global arena.

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Of course, not all Others occupy the same place in the American imagination. The foods to which Heldke refers are the “ethnic” cuisines of the developing world. France and French cuisine occupy an entirely different space in both the American past and in its current representations of Self and Other. Consider the following line from Ken Albala’s Series Foreword:

*Whether it is eating New Year’s dumplings in China, folding tamales with friends in Mexico or going out to a famous Michelin-starred restaurant in France, understanding these food traditions helps us to understand the people themselves.*

France is decidedly singular, for it is the undisputed creator and purveyor of haute cuisine and gastronomic arts.

Abramson is also acutely aware of dominant representations of France at play in the United States. Indeed she begins her introduction with the phrase: *“Nearly every American has some idea about French food. For those who dine out, the ideal for an elegant, glamorous restaurant meal is often a French one.”* In many ways, her work tries to respond in responsible ways to the expectations shaped by these representations, and so affords us a view of what these representations might be. For example, Abramson’s readers come away with a better understanding of and feeling for this sacred, culinary ancestor. The “Historical Overview” chapter alone is enough to do that. They also have the means, after reading the book, to participate a bit themselves (for example, by preparing a “blanquette de veau”).

Abramson is well aware of the stereotypes anchored in the United States’ long-lived, attraction-repulsion relationship with France and tries throughout the book to counter the most resistant. Sure, the French eat snails and frogs, but not really that much any more. And yes, they have outdoor markets and corner bakeries, but they are also a modern, industrial nation where most people shop in supermarkets. Sure, this is the land of haute cuisine and class distinction, but it is also the land of peasant dishes and ingenious home cooks. Sure, we have all heard of the so-called French paradox, but if the French are “having their cake and eating it too” in the eyes of many Americans - eating foods that they enjoy and staying healthy too - it is not because they have unwittingly been counteracting a “diet rich in foie gras with a glass of red wine all these years: for Abramson, it is because they partake on a regular basis in a rather elaborate meal ritual that stresses the sharing of food, quality over quantity, small portions and a richly varied diet, not to mention an almost “universal access to a high quality healthcare system” (p.158).

And yet, the very fact that France is found within this series says something else about the current place of culinary France in the American imagination. After all, the fact that the books in this series share the same organizational structure – and thus define, to some extent at least, the same categories as relevant throughout the world - represents a kind of leveling out of these same cultures; a kind of Boasian relativism where all cultures are considered different but equal<sup>10</sup>. Within this frame (as in much of the current discussion in the United States), French food culture is dethroned from its privileged place as THE food culture and becomes instead one food culture among others.

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that Boas too undertook a cultural inventory (and one largely bent on preservation) of the Native Indian tribes of North America.

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