Imagine for the moment a typical day’s food itinerary in the lives of Jane and John Hale, both working for a law firm in a large American city in 2011. They rise to a light breakfast of orange juice followed by croissants, which they have purchased from a local bakery and warmed in their microwave; while devouring the croissants, they sip Sumatra coffee brewed from beans purchased at a nearby Starbucks and freshly ground. During the lunch hour, the two meet at a small French restaurant near their law office to dine on a leek and mushroom quiche, accompanied by a glass of California merlot, and field greens dressed in oil and vinegar. On their way home in the evening, they stop at the local supermarket to purchase a fillet of flounder, which they poach in a California sauvignon blanc and serve with rice pilaf, brussels sprouts, and slices of baguette from their bakery. After finishing the bottle of sauvignon with the meal, they divide a serving of grapes and munch on artisanal chocolates as they savor a strong cup of decaf, home-brewed espresso.

This culinary scenario, which the Hales take for granted, would, in fact, have been unimaginable without a remarkable revolution in American foodways. Among the notable changes are the appearance of artisanal food enterprises, a greater variety of ethnic cuisines, and a class of consumers—mainly urban professionals and managers—whose palates are attuned to the new flavors and foods now available. To the extent that the beneficiaries are aware of these changes, they often credit them to Julia Child, who looms larger than life over the American culinary scene despite her death in 2003. Julia’s 1961 cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and the ensuing 1963 television show, *The French Chef*, were instrumental in popularizing gourmet dining in the United States. In the process, she became a much-respected and beloved authority whose influence continues to this day.

Julia’s celebrity, however, has obscured the work of her predecessors from the repeal of Prohibition to the appearance of her first book. As a result, scholars have ignored the creation of gourmet dining societies in the 1930s and have only touched on the founding of *Gourmet: The Magazine of Good Living*, fully twenty years before the appearance of Julia’s masterpiece. It is important to recover this past in order to properly assess the contributions of her predecessors and to
understand the foundation on which she built. Only in this way is it possible to identify the accomplishments for which she was primarily responsible. In writing this book, I have recreated the context for Julia’s work in order to give a clearer account of the roles she and her predecessors played in the rise of gourmet dining in America.

No small task at the outset, however, is to understand what “gourmet dining” means. As Julia wisely noted, Americans have so overused the term “gourmet” that it has become virtually meaningless. Once a noun identifying a connoisseur of fine dining, gourmet is now routinely used as an adjective that is even attached to restaurants at Disney World and frozen dinners.1

In France, gourmet originally signified a connoisseur of wines. To identify a connoisseur of fine dining (including wines), as well as a gluttonous individual, the French have preferred the terms gastronome and gourmand. Indeed, the founding father of food writing, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, used gourmand to mean connoisseur, as did Julia Child and her French collaborators, who were “heartily sick of gourmets” and thus named their cooking school “L’École des Trois Gourmandes.” Aside from its overuse, gourmet was objectionable to Julia because it connoted someone who was a refined, perhaps even a picky, eater. A gourmand, by contrast, enjoyed satisfying a lusty appetite while appreciating fine dinners. Thus, diners identified as gourmands would exercise their appetites without abandoning the rules of gastronomy that structured the consumption of food and wine.2

Despite their efforts, gourmet became the preferred term for a connoisseur of food and wine in the United States. As early as 1890, the art critic Theodore Child described the gourmet as someone who was both knowledgeable about the flavors of various ingredients and moderate in his appetite. Forty years later, F. Gray Griswold, a member of “The Kittens” dinner club in New York, seemed to agree with Theodore. He defined the gourmet as a “man with refined and appreciative taste for all things that are perfect in the way of food to eat and wine to drink.” Both authors, worried about the digestive problems as well as dulled brains that followed from overindulgence, thus preferred “gourmet” to “gourmand.” Other food writers of the 1930s generally followed their usage, and so the term gourmet came to identify fine diners in the United States. Following that usage, I consider those individuals who know fine food and wines, even when they have lusty appetites, as gourmets. It should be clear as well that Americans borrowed not only the terminology from France but also the cuisine. At least until 1961, gourmet dining for Americans usually meant some variation of French cuisine.3

In recent decades, however, “gourmet” has been used more frequently as an adjective to describe certain occasions, products, and processes such as “gourmet
“gourmet dining” or “gourmet food.” In its noun form, “gourmet” identified an individual who possessed an enduring capacity for recognizing good food and wine and exercised it continuously. Indeed, as André Simon, founder of the Wine and Food Society, insisted, the art of good living requires “giving daily” as much thought to food as to clothes. Once users labeled products and occasions as “gourmet,” however, they created a divide between the gourmet and everyday realms. Furthermore, under the new regime it was tempting to judge the book by the cover. Most Americans now identify individuals who attend the right occasions and shop at the right places as gourmets whether or not they are discerning diners. This is a case of putting the cart before the horse. The true gourmet would first determine the quality of the food and wine at these shops and dinners before patronizing them.

Despite these conceptual confusions, the influence of French cuisine in America has been significant. Yet the story of its dissemination beyond a small elite must begin with the launching of a gourmet dining movement in America following the repeal of Prohibition. And it must take account of the complexities of French cuisine that include both the production and consumption of fine food and wine for a variety of different events. A gourmet dinner runs the gamut from intimate occasions for family and friends prepared by a home cook to more elaborate and formal restaurant events presided over by professional chefs. The events are only the superstructure; the services and products provided by grocers, wine dealers, cookbook writers, and cooking schools constitute the foundation of this practice. And one of the distinguishing characteristics of the gourmet enterprise has been an ongoing written dialogue among practitioners in cookbooks, restaurant guides, travel books, society newsletters, and magazine articles, all of which helps to define practices and locate gourmet dining in the larger cultural life of the country.

Treated as a sociocultural phenomenon, gourmet dining illuminates the rise of luxury consumption of which it is an integral part. In this sense, it is a close relative of the high-end women’s fashions and interior decorating patronized by wealthy elites. Gourmet dining, like the women’s fashion industry, appealed to potential consumers by virtue of its status as a foreign import that limited its access initially to Americans who could afford a tour of France. The purveyors of both fine dining and women’s fashions relied heavily on articles and advertisements in luxury lifestyle magazines to promote their wares to affluent Americans.

Thorstein Veblen was among the first critics to consider the social significance of upper-class consumerism in his pioneering study, The Theory of the Leisure Class. Not coincidentally, he gravitated to this subject in the gilded age,
when newly rich American industrialists were indulging themselves in expensive clothing, more lavish interior decoration, and the kind of fine dining they experienced on their travels in Europe. Veblen not only documented the extravagant consumption of the wealthy but attempted to explain and condemn it as well by labeling various practices as “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous leisure.” These concepts approximate what Pierre Bourdieu has recently called “cultural capital,” focusing, as they do, on matters of style, knowledge, and the grasp of language, which are closely correlated to an individual’s position within the class hierarchy.5

Veblen’s critics among contemporary scholars have rightly dismissed his overly simplistic account of the motives of luxury consumers; even so, he was surely right in thinking that many buyers sought to enhance their social standing through the right purchases, while those below them in the social order often aped their “betters” to improve their own status. However, it is also true that Veblen erred in virtually ignoring the sensual pleasure that consumers experienced in viewing beautiful paintings or enjoying the flavors and textures of well-prepared food, whether they were part of the upper class or lower in the social hierarchy. And he ignored evidence that cultural dissemination sometimes proceeded from the bottom up.6

Nonetheless, Veblen’s book remains an instructive text on the history of luxury consumption. Among other things, it establishes the unequal interest among affluent Americans in different realms of consumption. From Veblen’s examples, it is clear that fashionable clothing and refined house decorations were far more interesting to the gilded-age rich than was fine dining. No doubt, this discrepancy had much to do with the country’s Puritan heritage, which regarded any luxury consumption with suspicion but tolerated fashion and home decoration, which engaged the visual sense, more readily than cuisine. Food was not only ephemeral, but after a dinner, its history was one of digestion and excretion, subjects that were inappropriate for public discussion. Accordingly, Veblen’s virtual silence on the pleasures of the table suggests that he shared the inhibitions of the nouveaux riches, whose social practices he usually criticized, although his illicit love affairs indicate that he felt otherwise about the pleasures of the bedroom.7

Veblen was certainly perceptive in discerning one of the prime strategies of the leisure class in assuring its ascendancy. In an era of mass-produced, standardized, and inexpensive goods, socially ambitious consumers, who wished to distinguish themselves from the masses, favored the purchase of handcrafted items that were one of a kind and unaffordable to less affluent individuals. As an illustration of this strategy, one can see that, by offering original dishes “designed”
Introduction

by a chef, the early restaurants enabled wealthy consumers to put on display their connoisseurship. In recent years, the increasing standardization of the food industry has made it all the easier for high-end restaurants to appeal to well-heeled patrons with artisanal food. In contrast to the mass-produced items in fast-food venues, the quality of the restaurant’s signature dishes stands out clearly.8

Among Veblen’s most important legacies was his methodology, which required a systematic cataloguing of clothing styles and objects of house decoration, as well as the rituals and behavior of luxury consumers of that era, to demonstrate the consumption patterns of the leisure class and their cultural implications. In my study of gourmet diners of the mid-twentieth century, some of whom were the heirs of Veblen’s leisure class, I have approximated Veblen’s practice by documenting the menu choices of gourmet societies, the restaurants they elected to dine in, along with the dress codes and rituals of the societies, to provide insights into the values and behavior of the dining societies and their members. The recipes published in Gourmet, along with restaurant reviews and travel advice that specify options available to readers, who wished to discover the pleasures of the table, offer similar insights. In addition, the commentary in various gourmet society newsletters, quarterlies, and histories contains material that illuminates the way dining societies wrestled with the problems of creating French cuisine in an American setting.

Some 250 years before Veblen’s polemic, the court of Louis XIV and the French nobility were developing a highly articulated dining code that incorporated many of the elements of what we now consider gourmet dining. That code spread gradually to the French bourgeoisie in Paris through the invention of the restaurant and the elaboration of carefully constructed menus in the years before and during the French Revolution. From the beginning, a dialogue about culinary principles, the diner’s behavior at the table, the environment in which dinners were served, and the implications of these activities for life beyond the table accompanied the serving of fine dinners. Regarding these implications, Brillat-Savarin claimed in his classic tome, The Physiology of Taste, that a dinner properly prepared and served to diners from different professions and social backgrounds would raise the level of intellectual interchange between them and bring about a state of social conviviality. Much like the rite of communion, a gourmet dinner offered material substances that, when properly consumed, would elevate the spiritual condition of the diners.9

The French dialogue about culinary practices and principles in the early nineteenth century gave birth to a dining culture that helped to define the national
identity; once word of this dining culture spread beyond French borders, foreigners increasingly visited France to experience the distinctive pleasures of the table. To exploit the opportunities opened to them by the popularity of their cuisine after 1850, the French created an informal culinary empire in Europe and America by exporting well-trained chefs. In sharp contrast to the angry European criticism of America’s global fast-food empire in recent years, few Americans commented on this earlier chapter of culinary imperialism.10

As a foreign import, gourmet dining in America competed with existing dining practices in an alien social and cultural environment. A borrowed institution of this sort quite naturally offended those mainstream Americans, especially middle-class women, who preferred to live by utilitarian values and appealed almost exclusively to the few Americans who had experienced French cuisine in France. They were familiar with the great repertoire of dishes and wines available in French restaurants, valued the aesthetics of fine dining, and enjoyed the lively conversations that often accompanied these dinners. Thus, even though the United States was a more egalitarian country than France, gender and class factors played an important role in shaping dining practices.

Despite the wealth and power of those Americans who appreciated fine dining, it was impossible to reproduce French cuisine in the United States in all its manifestations. Aside from the absence of certain ingredients and the initial scarcity of French chefs, gourmet dining was neither rooted in the history of the country nor a central component of the national identity. After all, Americans were busy settling the interior of a vast continent at the moment when the French discovered a frontier in the new dining practices, recipes, and cooking techniques that spread from the court to the bourgeoisie. Through cookbooks designed for homemakers, this culinary culture was soon accessible to middle-class homemakers in France. While there were distinctions between home and restaurant cuisine, common cooking processes, fresh ingredients, and the use of similar sauces and stocks underlay kitchen practices in both settings. Not all Frenchmen dined well in the nineteenth century, but a broadly accepted culinary culture was in place by 1900 to support the preparation of dinners of greater or lesser refinement.11

Because of the predominantly utilitarian approach to dining in America, the introduction of French cuisine would challenge the ingenuity of its borrowers. They would have to locate proper ingredients and find or train chefs who could prepare French dishes from recipes in cookbooks or by memory. In addition, recruiting diners who were interested in trying new dishes with different flavors and textures and instructing them in the art of matching these dishes with
appropriate wines would require time and effort. Of course, as Veblen pointed out, the scarcity of gourmet diners in America would become an advantage for the American leisure class. The work, money, and knowledge required to produce and consume refined dinners would lend prestige to producers and consumers alike, in addition to the pleasure they might experience from dining on dishes that had passed muster with connoisseurs in France.

For these reasons, French dining in America became the practice of a small, moneyed, and well-traveled elite that was effectively isolated from mainstream America. One of its early practitioners, Thomas Jefferson, a member of the planter elite, perfectly illustrates this link between gourmet dining and elevated social status. While serving as minister to France in the 1780s, Jefferson developed a taste for French cuisine and culture just as the first restaurants were opening their doors in Paris. During his stay there, Jefferson collected French cookbooks and wines that were shipped back to his home at Monticello, where he served French dinners to his distinguished guests. In the early nineteenth century, such elegant dining was limited to planters like Jefferson, merchants in America’s growing cities, and French expatriates, all of whom could afford to import French wines and hire knowledgeable chefs, but rarely dined in public.

Following Jefferson’s example in the late nineteenth century, the newly rich industrialists were in a somewhat better position to dine in the French fashion. After all, the transatlantic steamship brought Paris restaurants just a week’s voyage away from the eastern seaboard and facilitated the importation of French wines. Wealthy Americans could also take advantage of restaurants that immigrant French chefs had established in the years following Jefferson’s travels. Most notable were Delmonico’s (1830) in New York, Antoine’s (1840) in New Orleans, and Au Poulet d’Or (known as Poodle Dog) in San Francisco (1849), where Americans could enjoy a variant of French cuisine without visiting Europe. Men’s clubs in large American cities, which often hired French chefs and stocked extensive wine cellars, offered other opportunities to experience French cuisine. In the private realm, a few affluent industrialists enlisted French chefs to prepare their favorite French dishes on a regular basis at home.12

Like social class, gender was a barrier to gourmet dining in both countries, although American women experienced this barrier even more forcefully than their French counterparts. To be sure, French gastronomers assumed an unbridgeable gap between the male professional chef, who produced haute cuisine in a restaurant kitchen, and the amateur housewife or her cook preparing cuisine bourgeoise at home. In fact, the French culinary culture shared by chefs and cooks, based on the belief that dining should be a pleasurable and healthful activity,
transcended that divide. In America, however, twentieth-century food writers in women’s magazines, who were, in turn, supported by food-processing firms and nutritionists, challenged this core principle. They urged American home cooks to make health virtually the sole consideration in planning meals. In following this prescription, compliant home cooks distanced themselves and their families from the essential elements of French cuisine, especially the use of fresh ingredients transformed through the cooking process into tasty meals. In effect, the gender gap in America reinforced the divide between social classes and assured that interested members of the upper class would be the principal practitioners of gourmet dining.13

As it turned out, many upper- and upper-middle-class women, no doubt conflicted by the tension between class and gender, found class the more powerful influence. Representative of this group were women food writers for the luxury lifestyle magazines who eloquently promoted the gourmet dining tradition and blazed a trail for Julia Child. In recruiting thousands of upper-middle-class women to the gourmet movement as home cooks, Julia contributed to changing the composition of the gourmet movement to reflect important changes in the class structure and gender relations after World War II.

Beyond class and gender, the prevailing utilitarian ethos in America, which prescribed hard work to assure basic food, clothing, and shelter, reinforced the barriers to the widespread practice of gourmet dining. One manifestation of this ethos was a reluctance among many Americans to embrace sensual experience. Observers have often noted that the population of Catholic countries, where church services incorporate rituals, ceremonies, and imagery as key elements of the faith, is more readily disposed to enjoy sensual experiences in other dimensions of their lives. The reverse is generally true of citizens in Protestant countries and even more so where Calvinist traditions have prevailed. For this reason, most old-stock, middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century were unreceptive to the pleasures of gourmet dining. By contrast, their upper-class compatriots gravitated more readily toward sensual experiences as long stays in Europe and affiliation with the Episcopalian or Catholic churches socialized them to European ways.14

For many Americans, the gratification of the senses remained a questionable activity through much of the early twentieth century. Indeed, the fear of sensual pleasure was one factor that motivated many supporters of the Prohibition amendment. Ironically, the debacle of that policy and the rise of speakeasies eventually convinced some of these supporters to change course, question their so-called Victorian values, and repudiate the Prohibition amendment. Repeal
Introduction

was certainly a big step toward lowering the barriers that society had erected to protect individuals from the dangers of sensual experience. It also enabled more Americans to take an interest in French cuisine after 1934 and thus paved the way for the more rapid increase in these numbers after 1961; even so, gourmet dining has remained largely an activity for upper- and upper-middle-class Americans.15

Despite its interest in gourmet dining, the American elite has not always been a custodian of the borrowed culture. Indeed, American connoisseurs of French cuisine often altered menus in ways that would have been unacceptable in France. While they profited from access to the repertoire of French wines and dishes, they sometimes incorporated into their dinners German, Italian, and traditional American dishes, promiscuously mixed with French dishes. As for matching wines with food, American gourmets often served German, Spanish, and American alongside French wines, and they frequently offered cocktails before dinner, even if the meal that followed was French. In effect, gourmet dining helped to reshape the culture of the American elite, but that group, in turn, modified French practices to serve its own preferences and customs.

Although a growing segment of Americans practiced a form of gourmet dining that borrowed heavily from the repertoire of French dishes, they were not always well informed about the dining culture of France. In particular, American food writers in recent years often discuss specific French recipes and cooking practices with little reference to Brillat-Savarin’s insistence on gourmet dining as the key to achieving greater social conviviality among diners. And even as the adoption of French cuisine brought these diners closer to French ways, it opened a gap between them and Americans lower on the social scale, who had little interest in “upgrading” their diet to meet the standards of gourmets sometimes unclear about the benefits of such a change.16

In the course of my research, it has become clear that the history of gourmet dining in America is too large and complicated a subject to cover in a single volume. Accordingly, I have focused on two neglected institutions, gourmet dining societies and Gourmet magazine, while giving less attention to such important topics as the contribution of French restaurants in America, especially in the post–World War II era, and certain gourmet leaders, including James Beard and Craig Claiborne. Happily, readers will find ample treatment of these topics in other studies.

Furthermore, my emphasis on the sociocultural aspects of the history of gourmet dining, which link the movement to larger social and cultural trends,
precludes considering the intricacies of gourmet cooking. Of course, the staging of a gourmet dinner would be impossible without this kitchen labor. As a consumer activity, gourmet dining depends on the work of skilled artisans to transform the raw materials for any particular recipe through a complicated process into finished products that please the palate. My emphasis, however, is primarily on the reception of the finished products in dining rooms and restaurants and the social implications of this activity. That being said, the primary justification for regarding gourmet dining as one type of luxury consumption is its reliance on the painstaking work of skilled artisans, a story that other authors have amply covered.

To illuminate the issues under consideration in this book, I have mixed a chronological with a topical approach. The first two chapters consider the ideological and material foundations of the gourmet movement—the development of a gourmet dining ethos over more than a century, from Brillat-Savarin to M. F. K. Fisher, and the challenge posed by nutritionists to this position, and then how the new or refashioned luxury lifestyle magazines, which shaped the values and lifestyles of a rising upper-middle class, reinforced that ethos. It of course depended on material resources available to the movement in large cities, including, among others, restaurants, fine-food shops, older dining societies, and wine dealerships.

The next two chapters examine the origins and development of a gourmet dining movement through the creation of international societies and their local branches, most of them founded by Frenchmen, which held regular dinners and disseminated their ideas and practices to the larger public. These chapters also document the selective recruitment practices of the dining societies, the ways in which they encouraged other Americans to take up gourmet dining, and their expansion after World War II.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 deal with the establishment and impact of *Gourmet: The Magazine of Good Living*—the way the magazine selected its staff, identified and implemented its goals, and attempted to justify luxury dining in a period of relative austerity; its reliance on travel accounts, especially those of Samuel Chamberlain, to educate readers about European cuisines and cultures; and the fact that relatively few of the magazine’s readers actually cooked from the recipes in the articles written by “*Gourmet Chefs*” Louis De Gouy and Louis Diat.

A final chapter examines the impact of the gourmet movement on Julia Child and her success in reshaping it primarily through the troubled but effective collaboration with her French counterpart, Simone Beck.