Chapter Three

Origins, Rituals, and Menus of Gourmet Dining Societies, 1934–1961

The gourmet movement in America was founded in 1934. French wine producers and dealers, eager to stimulate the demand for wine in the United States, supplied the catalyst for the movement. They drew on the resources of large American cities, including fine restaurants, French immigrant chefs, elite men’s clubs, wine importers, and the interest of college-educated Americans, who were visiting Europe with great regularity and reading the luxury lifestyle magazines. In an age when Americans increasingly ate to live, the societies challenged the hegemony of nutritionists who promoted processed foods and valued vitamins and calories more than the taste of food and wine. They also sought to spread French cuisine beyond the American upper class where it was already a familiar feature.

Chronicles by members of these groups, archival records, proceedings in society journals, and press accounts illuminate both the societies’ culinary activities and their social significance for members. Inasmuch as the dining societies were closely associated with urban men’s clubs, they provide an opportunity to test the claims of Thorstein Veblen and his recent disciples on the role of these clubs in enhancing members’ “cultural capital,” as expressed through refined tastes. By taking as their mission the development of culinary connoisseurship, the dining societies, in fact, made a significant, yet specialized, contribution to increasing their members’ cultural capital.

In these respects, gourmet dining societies seem to exemplify the conspicuous consumption of Thorstein Veblen’s leisure class. According to Veblen and the recent scholarship on elite clubs, the members, men only, who already possessed far more than the necessities of life, enhanced their reputations by cultivating an aesthetic sense. As connoisseurs, they purchased fine clothing, food, and alcohol and developed refined manners so as to consume/display these items appropriately. Like the gourmet diners, the leisure class also joined groups featuring rituals and elaborate dress, which were all the more conspicuous during the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s. Meanwhile, both groups sought to
spread their ways to nonmembers: the leisure class by establishing a standard that “coerced” classes below them who wished to be recognized as “reputable”; the diners by publicizing their activities in the press.\(^1\)

Veblen and his recent followers are on solid ground in identifying a class of people who consumed luxury goods in the 1890s and/or the 1930s. However, their assessment of the motives of the leisure class and their gourmet dining successors is too narrow to explain the behavior of either group. Some gourmet diners did join societies to raise their social standing, but many were also interested in enjoying the pleasures of the table, often downplayed in America. And it would be a mistake to ignore the economic side of gourmet dining. Entrepreneurs profited from supplying wine and gourmet foods to their affluent customers, while gourmet diners, on occasion, sought to parlay connections with individuals of high social standing into profitable wine sales. Furthermore, Veblen’s belief that an instinct of workmanship was the driving force behind human behavior was no more convincing than gourmet leaders’ claim that satisfaction of the senses was the overriding motivation for their actions. In the absence of definitive evidence about instincts, the records show the mixed motives of members for joining gourmet societies. While some sought the pleasures of the table and others hoped to raise their social standing, many joined for both these and other reasons.

American gourmet dining societies arose at a time when French cuisine set the standard for all gourmet diners in the Western world. Indeed, Frenchmen pioneered such societies when they founded the Club des Cent (restricted to one hundred members) in 1914 to monitor the cuisine of France’s hotels and restaurants. It is not surprising, then, that the heads of the first three international gourmet dining societies in America were Frenchmen and that these societies featured French cuisine.\(^2\)

The rise of a new breed of dining societies was an important development in the country’s history. By committing themselves to the spread of French culinary ways, members of the societies rejected as provincial and unwise the excessive focus of nutritionists on achieving a healthy diet through processed foods; at the same time, gourmets embraced repeal as an opportunity to enhance fine dishes with appropriate wines. In this way, the gourmet societies bridged the Atlantic and diminished the cultural distance in culinary matters between America and Europe.

To accomplish this goal, the societies sought to transform the attitudes of members and, through them, of the public. In bylaws and constitutions, they stipulated proper decorum at the table, often based on the conventions of upper-class Europeans, so that members would enjoy both the food and the company.
To fulfill their mission, gourmet groups reached out to knowledgeable wine and food professionals, some of whom joined the societies. The dinner and wine committees, which brought together amateurs and professionals, including chefs and wine experts, planned the menus and selected the wines. In the process, interested amateurs learned from professionals how to arrange courses and match each course with the right wine, while the professionals received recognition from elite members of their communities.

Origins of the Gourmet Movement

The death of the most renowned chef of the early twentieth century in 1935 did not go unnoticed in New York City. To honor Auguste Escoffier’s memory, a new gourmet dining society, Les Amis d’Escoffier, was established in 1935, and two other societies gave commemorative dinners featuring his cookery. In spite of the Great Depression, gourmet dining societies were alive and well and becoming an important feature of the large-city landscape. As Henry Taft, brother of President William Howard Taft, remarked, “I see new clubs being formed on much the same model as our Society [the Wine and Food Society]. The idea has taken a hold not alone in this city [New York] but elsewhere.” The vitality of these groups was evident in their growing membership and competition for attention from the media.3

Three major gourmet societies emerged in the 1930s. One of them, the London-based Wine and Food Society (WFS), created six new chapters in America. Les Amis d’Escoffier, comprised of hotel managers, restaurant owners, and international chefs who worked in the United States, as well as elite members of the community, also developed a network of branches in large American cities. The third group, La Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin (the brotherhood of the Knights of the Wine Cup), which promoted Burgundy wines and culture, created its own branches after 1945. All three survived the unfavorable conditions during World War II to thrive in the postwar world.

The goals of the new societies had much in common. All three assumed that American gourmet societies, like their French counterparts, would plan and consume multicourse French meals, matched with appropriate wines for each course, to be served at periodic society dinners. In so doing, they exploited the repeal of Prohibition, but not without a sympathetic gesture toward Prohibitionists. Consistent with French practice, gourmet societies rejected alcoholic excess, especially the drinking of cocktails before dinner, in favor of moderate wine consumption. According to one proponent, gourmets were “high-minded,
temperate advocates of *haute cuisine* as the highest expression of civilization and culture. However, all three societies struggled to achieve autonomy from wine dealers and producers upon whose largesse they depended in the early years.4

There were also significant differences between the three groups in their approach to culinary matters. The Escoffier and Tastevin societies dedicated themselves to the celebration of classical French cuisine as espoused by Escoffier that was reflected in the French wines they served. Meanwhile, branches of the Wine and Food Society deviated occasionally from the French cooking and wines that they also venerated to experiment with other national cuisines, including traditional American dishes, during their monthly dinners and wine tastings.

The groups’ approaches to ceremonies and rituals were also distinctive. While the WFS kept its focus on culinary matters, the Escoffier Society made a great deal out of minor changes in costume and the dinner ritual. The Tastevin went much farther. From the outset, the Burgundy founders invented a tradition by appropriating rituals and costumes from various sources to enhance the effect of their large-scale dinners in an impressive château.

In the postwar era, the gourmet dining movement left a legacy of two distinctive models of excellence. The Tastevin embedded dining activities in ceremonies highlighting Burgundy’s regional and historical character and, under its New York leaders, worked closely with the best French chefs in the city to orchestrate splendid dinners in the French classical tradition. That experience contrasted sharply with the more frequent, but informal, activity of the core group of the Wine and Food Society of San Francisco (WFSSF). They dined at each other’s homes or in small restaurants and created their own menus, often prepared by members of the core group.5

The experimentation by members of the WFSSF was not a coincidence. More men were taking up cooking as a hobby that was distinguished from women’s work in preparing everyday meals. As weekend cooks entertaining friends or family, the men barbecued meat or prepared ethnic dishes. Cookbook authors encouraged male cooks by praising their natural aptitude for cooking. Already in 1929 *Good Housekeeping* presented cooking lessons for male readers, while in the following year Charles Browne, future director of the WFSNY, aimed his *Gun Club Cookbook* at male gourmets. It was only a short step to the 1939 founding of the Society of Amateur Chefs of America.6

In treating the expansion of the three major societies, I have considered only the oldest chapters in each organization. My intention is to focus on the origins
of the three societies and the important changes they set in motion, while avoiding the confusion and superficial treatment that would result from exploring the histories of several dozen different chapters.

**Origins of the Gourmet Dining Societies**

André Simon, assisted by his friend and collaborator A. J. A. Symons, founded the Wine and Food Society in London in 1933; within a year, it grew to over one thousand members. The idea of expanding the Society to the United States came from Simon’s 1934 talks with French officials, who hoped to exploit his success in selling wine to Anglo-Saxons and his reputation as a gourmet expert. They agreed to send him to America even though Simon intended to promote wine in general, rather than French wines in particular, while launching new chapters of his Wine and Food Society. Accordingly, Simon and his wife Edith set sail for the United States in November of 1934.7

As the Simons arrived in Manhattan, there was a great deal of ferment surrounding the repeal of Prohibition. Three gourmet society projects were at various stages of gestation and might have provided competition for the Wine and Food Society. Simon, however, bested the competition by winning support for his project from Frederick Wildman, the president of Bellows and Company. The two men understood that joining forces would advance their objectives. A strong WFS chapter in New York would boost Wildman’s wine sales, while his contacts with members of leading New York social clubs provided a pool of potential recruits for the WFS.8

Once Wildman was on board, another important player, Julian Street, endorsed the new WFS. He already respected Simon’s expertise and believed that he was “not narrow-mindedly a Frenchman.” And he was no doubt much taken with Simon’s considerable charm. Beyond that, Street, as a director of Bellows and Company, had a strong interest in solidifying his friendship with Wildman. In short order, Street became the first member of the WFS of New York and gave a key dinner party to introduce Simon to Henry Taft, as well as Woodrow Wilson’s close advisor, Colonel Edward M. House. Taft was soon named the first president of the New York chapter.9

Wildman also joined the WFS and used Bellows’ resources to strengthen the fledgling organization. On November 6, 1935, as the WFSNY prepared for its first dinner, Wildman hosted a luncheon for several New York journalists. The laudatory accounts of that event, written by G. Selmer Fougner and Lucius Beebe, put the WFSNY on the social agenda of elite New Yorkers interested in
fine dining. Clearly, Beebe’s enthusiasm for the WFSNY soared as he drank the Chateau Ausone 1831 served with a grilled breast of baby chicken at Wildman’s lunch. “So rare, so holy a vintage was approached by all with reverence . . . We had not expected a miracle, but we got one.”

Simon followed the same approach he had used in New York to launch five other American chapters of the WFS in the winter of 1934/35. During his cross-country swing, he visited Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. In each city, he identified food professionals like Wildman with reputations as wine connoisseurs, who then introduced him to potential recruits for a new chapter of the WFS. From these recruits, Simon found an individual to serve as honorary secretary for the new WFS branch and, with his help, organized a first dinner to meet and greet prospective members.

In establishing these new branches, the role of men’s clubs was significant. Already, Simon had recruited fellow members of the Saintsbury and Ye Sette of Odd Volumes clubs in founding the WFS of London. To recruit their counterparts in the United States, he and his American friends followed the same course. Charles Browne, mayor of Princeton, organized a recruitment dinner, attended by 125 people at the University Club in New York. In Boston, Simon chose leaders for the new WFS chapter from Le Club des Arts Gastronomiques. Following the advice of the French Consulate in San Francisco, he approached Le Cercle de l’Union. In Los Angeles, it was the eventual honorary secretary Phil T. Hanna who recruited heavily from two small men’s clubs to which he belonged; eleven Zamoranos and six Sunsetters eventually joined the WFSLA.

Only three months after the New York chapter’s inaugural dinner, the Wine and Food Society encountered serious competition from the newly organized Les Amis d’Escoffier. Its founder, G. Selmer Fougner, author of the New York Sun daily column “Along the Wine Trail,” had initially been well disposed to the WFS. However, Fougner’s authoritative pronouncements on culinary matters, for which he was known as “the Baron,” rubbed many, including Simon, the wrong way. (Fougner’s friend and fellow correspondent Lucius Beebe called him “a gusty and inflammatory personage.”) In a letter to Julian Street, Simon remarked, “Poor Fougner is to my mind a vain and somewhat greedy jay with a few peacock feathers stuck in his tail: his croaking is worse than his bite.” Simon had accordingly passed over Fougner in choosing the leaders of the New York branch of the WFS.

Fougner’s response was to create a rival gourmet society that drew most of its members from the American Culinary Federation. It was entirely appropriate
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for the ACF to honor Auguste Escoffier, who had died in 1935, since two of its leading officers, Joseph Donon and Charles Scotto, along with other members, had been trained by Escoffier. In addition to honoring their mentor, the founders expected the new society to enhance the prestige of all chefs, increase their job opportunities, “stimulate popular interest in fine food and wine,” and provide an occasion for chefs and restaurant executives to enjoy having someone else plan and prepare a fine dinner. In order to keep the costs at $6 per person, however, they served only two wines with each meal. Meanwhile, the Culinary Review, the monthly newsletter of the ACF, agreed to reprint Fougner’s Sun columns that publicized society dinners.14

Unmistakable signs of a rivalry between the two societies developed in 1936. Simon chided the chefs for making “friendship” the highest priority of the group, rather than fine dining, and regretted that spending was limited to $6 per person for each meal. The total, he argued, would be inadequate to dine in an Epicurean fashion of “extravagant luxury.” How could they afford “nightingales’ tongues” at that price? Ignoring the fact that the new society was composed largely of professional food types, Simon asserted that people of means and taste should be willing to pay more for fine dinners.15

The rivalry continued when the WFS, deliberately appropriating its rival’s name and turf, held an Escoffier dinner in the fall of 1936 at the Pierre Hotel, whose chef was Charles Scotto, president of the American Culinary Federation; Fougner, in turn, rebuked the WFS in a column entitled “Imitation Is the Sincerest Form of Flattery” and, without naming names, identified the WFS as “the so-called gourmet group” that was operating on “a somewhat commercial basis.” Not to be outdone, the Escoffier Society held its own dinner at the Pierre just two months after the WFSNY event. This rivalry caught the attention of Julian Street, who remarked to WFSNY president Taft, “A few other societies such as ours can do no harm, in fact I think it is all for the good of the cause if they are properly and knowingly conducted. I think ours is the best certainly, and hope it will remain so.” André Simon concurred. Asserting that “indifference” was more dangerous than opposition, he proposed that the WFS exploit the opposition just as a sailboat uses a headwind to move forward. Meanwhile, from 1937 to 1939, the leaders of the Escoffier Society, following the example of the WFS, established chapters in Chicago, St. Louis, Boston, Washington, D.C., St. Paul, and New Orleans, thus making the society a national organization like its rival.16

On March 27, 1940, a third international gourmet society, the Burgundy-based Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, launched its American history with a dinner at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. Among those inducted into
the society were wine dealers Charles Codman and Frederick Wildman, both members of the WFS, as well as journalists G. Selmer Fougner and Lucius Beebe, already members of the Escoffier Society. Believing that the advent of more societies would strengthen the cause of gourmet dining, wine and food professionals did their part in making each of these societies a viable entity by joining two or more of them.17

The founders of the Burgundy-based Tastevin intended to raise the sagging sales of Burgundy wine by creating their new organization on November 16, 1934, a day after André Simon sailed to America to establish the WFS. Two men from Nuits St. Georges, Camille Rodier, author of several books on Burgundy wines and secretary general of the local tourist office, and Georges Faiveley, whose family owned Burgundy vineyards, promoted their product at home and abroad by linking it to regional history and culture. They held the Society dinners incorporating Burgundy dishes and wines in a medieval chateau.18

Recognizing the potential of the U.S. market, the Tastevin invited William C. Bullitt, the American Ambassador to France, to attend its spring 1937 dinner, where he was inducted into the society. The man responsible for bringing Bullitt to Nuits St. Georges was the Franco-Swiss entrepreneur Jules Bohy, owner of the Hotel Bohy-Lafayette in Paris, where many American veterans had stayed. Worried about the future of the Tastevin in the event of war and hoping to stimulate wine sales, Faiveley and Rodier authorized Bohy to establish a Tastevin organization in America. One week before the outbreak of World War II, Bohy embarked on the Normandie for a three-week stay that was extended to six years.19

Between June 1940 and Pearl Harbor, Bohy organized three New York dinners after his St. Regis debut, and one in New Orleans. Following the practices of most other gourmet leaders, he suspended further meetings of the Tastevin until the outcome of the war seemed clear. Despite the interruption of the war years, however, all three societies prepared to renew their dinners in the postwar period.20

Rules, Rituals, and Practices

There was a rough consensus among gourmet practitioners about how they ought to behave during society dinners. While each society, and sometimes chapters within societies, put its own stamp on practices and principles, several written documents codified these rules for members. The most definitive of these guides was “A Gourmet’s Code of Modern Dining,” written by J. George
Frederick, the founder of the New York Gourmet Society, and Roy Alciatore. In addition, the Escoffier Society prepared a constitution and bylaws, while Simon’s recruitment brochure and the Los Angeles branch’s short written document spell out WFS expectations for decorum. With exceptions noted, the following practices and principles were accepted by both national and local gourmet groups.21

The WFS and the Escoffier Society called for the improvement of “food, wine and the arts of the table” through the creation of dining societies. To reach this goal, both societies set high standards for their dinners and strongly emphasized the distinction between the gourmet, who pursued a cuisine of high quality, and the gourmand, who was solely interested in quantity. All three societies forbad the consumption of whisky and the practice of smoking before and during the meals, because they dulled the palate. In addition, the Tastevin and the Escoffier societies refused to serve water at the table so as to give proper homage to the French wines that were served. Inasmuch as the chef determined the flavor of each dish, salt, pepper, and condiments were also absent from the table.22

Of course, there were disagreements among practitioners about elements of this code. Despite the ban on whiskey, G. Selmer Fougner was proud of his three thousand cocktail recipes, many of which he presented in Scribner’s, while Lucius Beebe defended the cocktail as “representative of the most civilized and urbane habits of American tosspots.” Although he enjoyed wine, Beebe deplored the “postured sniffing of debatable vintage years” and sneered at André Simon for ordering “a bowl of flowers removed [from the table] because it obliterated the bouquet of the Chateau Latour ’20.”23

As important as the quality of the food was the environment for gourmet dining. To honor the food, and out of respect for fellow diners, the Escoffier bylaws stipulated that diners arrive on time or risk missing the courses already served. Once launched, meals were to proceed in a leisurely fashion so as to encourage social interactions. As the Chicago Daily Tribune explained in 1935, gourmet diners were seeking “slower, better meals” accompanied by lively conversation in a quiet atmosphere, uninterrupted by music, dancing, or speeches. To assure such an environment, the Escoffier Society, following in the footsteps of the Club des Cent and the British upper class, forbad conversations about politics, religion, and business affairs. The society also enjoined diners to remain silent as each new dish was served and banned speeches during and after meals. Despite this rule, Selmer Fougner delivered lectures on gastronomy during desserts that “lasted as long as there was a bottle of vintage cognac convenient to
(his) hand.” For a dinner-ending ceremony during which the chef was invited to receive the applause of diners and a critical review of his creations, the Tastevin and Escoffier societies made an exception.24

To pay homage to the excellence of the cuisine, there were strict rules about dress. WFS members dined in black tie and dinner jacket, while the Tastevin required at first a white tie to increase the level of formality. As for the Escoffier Society, members dressed in business suits, protected by bibs tucked into their collars.25

The gourmet societies rotated dinners from one prestigious club or hotel restaurant to another so long as they could accommodate the membership of a group that ranged from fifty to three hundred. The Escoffier Society gathered twice a year for their banquets, while the WFS chapters usually held one dinner a month except for the summer season. In addition to one official dinner per
year, Tastevin chapters could add other unofficial dinners and tastings, but the setting of these events was a far cry from those of the parent organization. For the picturesque cellar of the Château Clos de Vougeot, Americans substituted “dignified” spaces in leading hotels furnished with platforms on which to conduct the induction ceremonies. To experience a “chapitre” (official gathering), Americans could travel to Burgundy.26

The size of chapters varied. By 1936, the New York chapter of the WFS had five hundred members and an attendance, including members and guests, that reached 337 for a dinner at the Hotel Pierre in 1936 and 532 for a champagne tasting at the Ritz-Carlton in 1939. The opening tasting of the Boston branch at the Somerset Hotel in December 1936 attracted 150 members and guests, as did the “perfect dinner” at the Copley Plaza on March 15, 1937. With a limit of fifty members in Chicago and one hundred in San Francisco and Los Angeles, dinners were more intimate. In order not to turn away prospective members after the chapter reached one hundred, Los Angeles created a waiting list. While the Escoffier Society limited membership to one hundred in all but the Chicago chapter (fifty), each member could invite a guest to chapter dinners. After World War II, Tastevin branches ranged in size from twenty-five to more than a hundred members in New York City.27

In addition to their famous bibs, members of the Escoffier Society honored their patron in various ways. In the Sheraton Park dining room in Washington, “a silver fountain spilled water softly at one end of the room, while just behind the head of the table, Escoffier ruled the room—from his white-draped portrait.” In Chicago, diners set a place at a table in the center of the room with a black-draped chair where waiters paused to offer each course for inspection before serving the guests. At the spring 1937 Escoffier dinner in New York, waiters unveiled a wax bas-relief of the great chef sculpted by his wife. Diners were suitably moved by the occasion.28

At least two branches of the Wine and Food Society, New York and San Francisco, paid special attention to the printing of menus. Most notable was the artistry of the San Francisco menu designers. As for New York, the eight-page menu for the inaugural dinner in November 1935 featured a cover illustration of chefs grilling wild game in medieval times. Inside was the customary list of courses and wines along with recipes for each of the dishes.29

Among the three societies, the Tastevin alone developed a hierarchical organization with appropriate titles for different ranks, as well as a much stronger emphasis on ceremony and ritual, especially in its initiation of new members. This was a short theatrical production with members as witnesses, while the
officers and inductees performed on stage. The Tastevin banner provided the backdrop; props included a wine barrel, mallets, a root of the vine, and a large goblet. To the strains of Verdi’s Triumphal March, officers in red and yellow robes marched to the stage, where the Tastevin’s highest official waited. He, in turn, asked each initiate to come forward and strike the wine barrel three times with a wooden mallet; the inductee then swore to “lead a gastronomic life with irreproachable wine habits,” to “empty the wine glass when filled and to fill it when emptied as prescribed by Notre bon Maître François Rabelais,” and to “contribute with all your winy power to the active propagation of French wines in general and of those of Burgundy in particular.” Initiates then drank from the cup of honor, which “contains the well being of the body and the happiness of the soul. This great wine, which gives us youth and lifts from our shoulders the weight of the years, which lightens the burden of cares and memories from our souls . . . Par Bacchus, par Noé père de la vigne (by Noah, father of the vine), par St. Vincent, patron des vigneron (by St. Vincent, patron of wine growers). Nous vous armons (elevate) chevaliers du Tastevin.” The presiding officer then struck the candidates’ shoulders three times with a root of the vine and embraced each of them, while bestowing the token of membership, the tastevin attached to a red and gold ribbon. Following this ritual, one of the new initiates delivered a short speech in behalf of the others. And then, as was customary at the Clos de Vougeot, diners performed the “Ban Bourguignon” (a Burgundian chant for happy occasions that includes hand-clapping and twisting of hands over the head and the singing of “la-la-la”).

Ceremonies did not always go as planned. At the December 1941 induction, Jules Bohy, wielding the vine root, tapped Lucius Beebe on the head rather than the shoulders, precipitating laughter from the audience. Beebe, in turn, misfiried as he drank wine from the silver chalice and soiled his white shirt. Thus, an evening that began with “formal grandeur” ended, in Beebe’s words, with “glad whoops and banshee screams.”

In the late 1940s, Tastevin rehearsal dinners were also occasions for examining new candidates. The examination, which required a knowledge of the seven-page Burgundy section of William Bird’s French Wines, would not have dimmed the festivities. Candidates who knew the names of one red wine and one white wine from the Côte de Beaune and the Côte du Nuits and could tell which one they preferred and why were on course to pass the 1949 exam.

Given the general agreement on principles and practices between the three major societies, rituals excepted, it is not surprising that journalists sometimes confused them. One reported that the WFS asked its members to tuck their
napkins under their chins and forbade the discussion of politics, religion, and business, when, in fact, these were Escoffier Society rules.\footnote{33}

**Wine Dealers and Producers**

The three gourmet societies struggled in various ways to achieve their independence from the wine industry. Even the Escoffier Society, which banned wine dealers from membership to escape any hint of dependency, permitted them to attend society dinners as guests. Furthermore, although the Wine and Food Society never directly promoted wine, dealers and producers joined the various chapters at least in part to cultivate relationships with individual members and the organization that might result in future sales. From the outset, a practice developed in the WFS that was potentially compromising for both sides. Wine dealers and/or producers supplied wines without charge to their fellow members for tastings and dinners. In the process, it became more difficult for members of the WFS to offer honest opinions about the quality of the wine and for the dealers to pretend that their relationship with the WFS was disinterested.\footnote{34}

For that reason, WFS chapters tried to control the damages by providing that dealers and producers were entitled to individual but not corporate membership and were not to serve on governing councils. To assure its independence, the WFSLA tracked the proportion of dealers to the total membership. According to Honorary Secretary Phil Hanna, only half a dozen of its one hundred members were “financially interested” in wine. Many among those who had no such interest made substantial donations of wine until, in 1939, the chapter created its own cellar. San Francisco soon followed suit.\footnote{35}

Nonetheless, the two California chapters tied themselves so closely to the state’s wine industry that they risked becoming unofficial public relations agents for the producers. The link between chapters and producers was the Wine Institute, run by Leon Adams, which California growers had established; Adams and his close friend Maynard Amerine, an oenologist at the University of California, Davis, were both members of the WFSSF. Together with wine producers, they assured donations of California wine to many chapter dinners and wine tastings; in the process they succeeded in securing the unofficial support of some members of the WFSSF for their ongoing campaign to spread the consumption of California wines. As World War II approached, members of the San Francisco society organized tastings of California wines at the Golden Gate International Exposition and served as judges of competitions among the wine makers.\footnote{36}
Meanwhile, the WFSSF supported the efforts of eastern dealers to fill the vacuum that would follow the end of European wine imports during World War II with California wines. Among the most interested were Frank Schoonmaker and Julian Street, both of whom had written successful wine manuals at the time of repeal that devoted a chapter to California wines and were themselves involved in the promotion of wine sales. In 1938, Schoonmaker toured California, identified its best wines, and agreed to designate them “Frank Schoonmaker Selections,” a step that promised great rewards for their producers. However, he exacted a price. Winemakers who labeled their wines with the names of European regions (e.g., Burgundy) would have to renounce this practice and identify them according to the region where they were produced and the predominant grape used in making the wine.37

The WFSSF immediately took note of the recognition of two Inglenook wines, a 1933 Napa cabernet and a 1933 Johannisberg Riesling, as “Frank Schoonmaker Selections.” Harold Price, honorary secretary of the WFSSF, with support from Amerine and Adams, arranged a special WFS dinner that included the two wines selected by Schoonmaker and some nineteenth-century vintages. The dinner not only honored Inglenook but encouraged Frank Schoonmaker in his pioneering venture.38

Martin Ray’s Paul Masson winery found its champion in Julian Street, who was advising Bellows and Company about palatable American wines. After tasting Ray’s pinot noir, Street immediately telegraphed Ray: “your pinot noir 1936 tasted tonight is first American red wine I ever drank with entire pleasure.” As Street explained to Harold Price, he now believed that California could produce “admirable, pure, unadulterated, uncooked, unfooled-with wines of excellent quality—wines that a critical person can truly enjoy.” At Price’s urging, the WFSSF recognized Ray’s achievement with a special dinner featuring Masson cabernet sauvignon 1936 and the now famous Masson pinot noir 1936.39

The WFSSF promotion of California wines went further. In 1939, Adams and Amerine urged members of the WFSSF, who were doctors, to launch the Society for the Medical Friends of Wine. Modeled on the Médecins Amis du Vin, a French gourmet society, it was populated by doctors who advocated the moderate consumption of wine as a health measure; however, despite its French origins, the Society almost always served California wine. After each dinner, a speaker presented research on the effects of wine on the human body and related topics. In the near future, Adams and Amerine hoped to organize similar societies for engineers and lawyers in other cities, but they never implemented their plan.40
Since the New York chapter of the WFS drank mostly imported wines, members dealt more frequently with wine dealers than producers. Indeed, Jeanne Owen, French widow of an American businessman, cookbook author, and honorary secretary of the WFSNY, organized dealers to ante up “cash and kind” for tastings of “almost Oriental magnificence.” Owen reminded officers of the society that only the generosity of the dealers, who provided all the wine for tastings and dinners, kept the treasury in the black. Even so, members of the WFSNY were confident that, with donations from a dozen or more dealers, no one of them could use the Society for commercial purposes. Still, in 1955, André Simon described the WFSNY as “a first-class highly successful sales promotion organization.” Clearly, the chapter fell short of his expectations.41

The situation of the Tastevin was even more delicate, since the organization was designed to promote the consumption of Burgundy wines. Indeed, Gordon Brown, the treasurer of the New York Tastevin, asserted in 1945 that the group was both a “club for gentlemen who appreciate the value and enjoyment of wine” and a trade association indirectly advancing the interests of the wine trade. This dual identity, in turn, posed a potential conflict of interest, since Tastevin leaders, including Rodier, Faiveley, and Bohy, profited from the production and sale of Burgundy wine, as did many of the American officers who were engaged in the food and wine business. Brown, who enjoyed the “priceless . . . prestige” of the Tastevin, worried that the members might become “unwittingly involved in somebody’s wine business.”42

Among other things, Brown objected to the exclusive rights granted to Dreyfus, Ashby and Co. to import Burgundy wines especially designated as “Confrérie selections.” He argued that Bohy should either open this trade to all American importers or obtain their endorsement of the monopoly. Without explanation, the French leaders of the Tastevin rejected Brown’s proposal, thus leaving Dreyfus as the sole importer of these wines.43

In response to Brown’s protest, Bohy claimed that since the 1930s the sale of Confrérie wines had been a prerogative of the society’s governing body. He acknowledged that Faiveley and Rodier headed wine firms and that six members of the governing council served as blind tasters for the Confrérie selections. However, the Tastevin owned no vineyards and was not “run as a Business Firm but as an Association of connoisseurs and lovers of fine wines and good food.” To be sure, the organization made a small profit on wine sales but used the money for society expenses.44

Nonetheless, Brown’s concerns had some merit. Bohy was “the primary representative of several Burgundian wine organizations” and had worked with
Dreyfus, Ashby and Co. as a wine salesman since 1940. At a meeting of the society’s governing body in 1949, Bohy admitted that he was importing 910 cases of wine per year, including the Confrérie selections he sold to various Tastevin leaders, and he insisted that such wines be served at Confrérie dinners. In addition, Bohy also marketed Tastevin wine glasses, with or without the society’s insignia, to members and hotels.\textsuperscript{45}

American leaders never decided whether the Confrérie’s involvement in the wine trade was a conflict of interest. It seems clear, however, that the volume of trade was insufficient to worry most members of the society or wine importers who continued to collaborate with the Tastevin. Compared with the overall sales of Burgundy wines, which increased during the 1950s, Tastevin’s share was a small one.\textsuperscript{46}

The Dining Experience: Classical French Menus

No issue could be more important to a gourmet society than the selection of food and wine to serve at its dinners. The pioneers of the movement, among whom French expatriates played a large role, hoped to rescue dining in America from the clutches of the food establishment by modeling French cuisine for Americans. Even so, the three major societies and branches within those societies had different ideas about exactly what role French cuisine should play and to what extent there was a place for other cuisines at the societies’ dinners. Two different approaches were represented. The Tastevin and the Escoffier societies, consistent with their mission, showcased \textit{haute cuisine} at all their dinners and served only French wine, while branches of the WFS pursued a more eclectic approach. They featured French, mostly \textit{haute, cuisine} for the majority of their dinners, but they also tried other national cuisines and wines. To illustrate these practices, I will provide some examples of representative meals for each of the three societies and discuss in greater detail several outstanding dinners. It would, unfortunately, take another book to present the menus of the numerous branches of all three gourmet societies.

In pursuing their goals, the three societies relied heavily on restaurants in large hotels with well-trained French chefs in the kitchen, who were capable of serving a gourmet dining group of from fifty to several hundred prominent men—and occasionally women. In so doing, they had much to gain or lose, since the societies evaluated the meals they prepared and publicized the results in local, and occasionally national, media.

French chefs in the United States, especially in large hotels, did not await the founding of the dining societies to offer French cuisine to patrons, many of
whom were already accustomed to it. Indeed, their dinner menus often listed French dishes and wines alongside American options. Following the major headings on such hotel menus, a prospective diner was likely to find dishes that were regularly available in tourist restaurants in France, although no single restaurant offered all the choices listed below. Under soups, diners could choose from petite marmite, onion au gratin, and leek and potato. Among fish dishes, sole, roe, or trout prepared à la meunière (lightly floured, fried in butter, with lemon juice, noisette butter, and parsley), as well as mussels, sole, turbot, and trout, all prepared à la Marguery (cooked in white wine and fish stock thickened with egg and butter), were available. So were frog legs prepared à la Provençal, while veal kidney and chicken, as well as sole, were cooked à la bonne femme (with bacon, small onions, and potato balls). Restaurants served Béarnaise as a sauce for New York sirloin, tenderloin, and sole; diners could also choose clams, chicken livers, tripe, and sirloin in a Bordeaux sauce. Somewhat more exotic was sweetbreads financière (with chicken quenelles, cockscombs, truffles, mushrooms, Madeira, chicken consommé, and sauce espagnol). Typically, Brie and Camembert were listed under cheeses, while desserts ranged from crêpes suzette, poire melba, meringue glacé, and œufs à la neige to assorted French pastry. Thus, well before the founding of dining societies, most French chefs were serving basic French dishes.

Of course, these chefs could, if requested to do so, offer a variety of other French dishes to their more receptive and knowledgeable guests, including members of the dining societies. Even so, the latter’s fare, in general, was not adventurous. Many society dinners featured the best cuts of beef, including tenderloin and filet mignon, as well as crowns or saddles of lamb; however, despite the prominence of red meat, more fowl than beef or lamb was served. Wild ducks and partridge, as well as domestic game birds, including guinea hen, Cornish game hen, and squab, were popular. Members dined on rabbit on several occasions, while venison, veal, pork, and organ meats appeared occasionally as main courses.

Some gourmet diners regarded these menu choices as insufficiently imaginative. In a letter inviting members of the WFSSF to a 1940 Bordelais dinner at which lamb was served, the physician Marius Francoz urged the society to “get away from the proverbial food that one generally gets at a banquet and to omit chicken, steak, and roast beef.” Judging from subsequent menus, the society ignored this advice, although lamb was frequently served.

Among the three gourmet societies, Les Amis d’Escoffier followed their mentor’s advice by simplifying the lavish meals of the late Victorian period to
“set an example that can be followed by the rank and file of American amateurs,” whose stomachs and budgets would not withstand the consumption of “whole boiled turtles, nests of plover’s eggs, flocks of ortolans, etc.” Accordingly, they chose dishes from the repertoire of French haute cuisine, including one of Escoffier’s signature dishes at each event, as well as one of the specialties of the host chef.50

From the founding of the society in 1935, G. Selmer Fougner was certain that the Escoffier group was on the road “to become the high authority and final arbiter in all matters epicurean.” In addition, he knew that the diners were quite up to the task because they were “the best known chefs of America.” The fullest realization of Fougner’s hopes for the society must have been the celebrated fourth dinner of the Escoffier group at the Hotel Pierre in January 1937. According to the Baron, “rarely has the magic of fine cookery been demonstrated with greater perfection than was done on that memorable night.” It was, without question, traditional French cuisine featuring one of Escoffier’s favorite recipes, the Poularde Rose de Mai (chicken breast served with a tomato mousse), accompanied by a reserve du cardinal 1928 (Burgundy). However, the presentation of this dish on the trial run two days before the dinner caused a ruckus. One member of the Bonne Bouche (tasty mouthful) dinner committee, believing that the molded chicken in the center of the platter was made of papier mâché, summoned Chef Scotto from the kitchen to reprimand him for violating Escoffier’s rule that decorations must be edible. Scotto scornfully responded that the chicken had been sculpted from tomato mousse.51

While the Escoffier Society received good marks from critics in the New York press, the culinary performance of the more affluent Tastevin, which could afford to serve a greater variety of fine wines, was more noteworthy. Among various acclaimed dinners held by the Tastevin, Clementine Paddleford of the Herald Tribune singled out the May 1948 event as “one of the great dinners of the year.” From records in the society archives, it is possible to reconstruct the planning process from start to finish and thus to understand the ingredients, material and otherwise, that went into creating the dinner. Memos and menus clarify the collaboration between Chef Louis Diat of the Ritz-Carlton and Gordon Brown, treasurer of the New York Tastevin and chair of the dinner committee, in achieving success.52

The first and most important decision for the committee was to choose wines for the event. Accordingly, at its first meeting, Brown set a date for a wine tasting, after which the committee discussed menu options and locations for the dinner. Five members of the dinner committee, the presidents of Julius
Wile and Peter Greig importing firms, and three members of the French embassy attended a blind tasting at the offices of Julius Wile and Sons. To choose two Burgundy wines, one each from the regions of Beaune and Côte de Nuits, the tasters eliminated ten of the twelve wines, only to realize that they had selected two from Beaune; a second tasting was necessary to select a Côte de Nuits. At the second dinner committee meeting, convened two months before the event, members chose the Ritz-Carlton Hotel as the dinner site and clarified menu options. There followed negotiations with the hotel to determine the cost of the meal, including wines, and a date for a rehearsal dinner at least ten days ahead of the actual event to allow time for a second rehearsal dinner if needed. Brown reported to the hotel the number of diners who would attend the occasion and the Society’s rules for decorum and service. He also arranged the seating, publicity, initiation ceremony, and menu printing.

Using the selection of wines to guide the choice of dishes, the committee presented the resulting menu to Chef Diat in time for him to prepare the rehearsal dinner. On that occasion, committee members found the dishes tasty but sought replacements that were more seasonal, more suited to the wines, and more appropriate to the order of the dishes in the meal. According to Brown, the stuffed sole had too strong a flavor so that it broke the “upward trend of taste enjoyment” that was to culminate in the asparagus Hollandaise. To remedy this problem, the committee eliminated the fish stuffing in favor of a milder Bercy butter preparation (with shallots, beef marrow, and white wine, etc.). Because lamb and new potatoes were in season, the members replaced the saddle of veal with a baron of lamb that would be served with fresh peas. On the dessert front, Brown rejected “the more elaborate and rich Savarin” (a rum-flavored cake filled with cream and fruit) in favor of glace vanille aux fraises parisiennes (vanilla ice cream with Parisian strawberries) that were then in season. The strawberries would be soaked in Grand Marnier for twenty-four hours. Given these substantial revisions, Brown invited the committee to a second rehearsal to test the new dessert and the compatibility of the revamped fish and meat courses with the accompanying Corton Charlemagne 1937 (a white wine) and the Musigny Comte de Vogüe 1937 (red).

The luncheon was a great success. Brown reported the committee’s “enthusiasm” for the pairings of the wines with their respective fish and meat courses. However, he proposed another meeting to test two preparations of the strawberries—either with all or half of the berries soaked in Grand Marnier. As for the asparagus, Brown maintained that six stalks constituted a serving “small
enough to leave one wishing there would be one more stalk, yet not so large as to spoil the effect of the next course.  

Once the menu was set, Brown sent out detailed instructions about service and decorum. He wanted to set the right tone by assuring a warm welcome to diners, as if they were arriving at a private home. To prevent smoking before the end of the dinner, he also urged members to introduce their guests to officers on the council who could deter the “absent-minded” from reaching for a cigarette.

The proper serving of wine was also a high priority for Brown. Each guest should have as much Corton Charlemagne as he wanted, but waiters should guard against wasting the wine. As for the red wines, the Beaune Noirot Carrière 1937 and the Musigny should be opened an hour before the meal. Just ahead of the lamb course, waiters were to pour a single glass per guest from the bottle of Beaune placed in a basket to avoid disturbing the sediment; only after the guests had drunk the Beaune should the Musigny be poured. And, following each pouring, waiters were to right the bottles to prevent dripping and thus to leave the “impression that the wine is precious.”

In addition, Brown invited Chef Diat to join the diners after dessert and drink a glass of Musigny with them. After a toast from the members, Roy Alicantore would critique the meal and give Diat a chance to respond. Brown regarded this interchange as an opportunity for members to take a more active role in the proceedings, but he also wanted the commentator to offer a measured appraisal rather than the harsh review that Chef Lugot of the Waldorf received after the fall 1947 dinner. Following the exchange between Diat and Alciatore, members of the council would depart to don their robes for the ceremonial portion of the evening.

While the planning documents suggest a highly organized and orderly event, Brown knew that, as the evening wore on, diners would reach various stages of inebriation. The singing would become increasingly festive, the oratory excessive. And he worried that once the officers drank with initiates other members would resent the council “taking advantage of their position to get an extra gulp of good wine.” “Cat-calls and other disruption of the ceremonies from the balance of the conclave who at that juncture are full of everything including Cognac and Champagne” would ensue as they did at the St. Regis in December of 1948. A “voluntary communion to partake of the cup that was held in readiness for them” provoked unruly behavior on that occasion.

Most members were happy to leave the planning of the New York dinners in the hands of Brown, but not Lucius Beebe. Writing “from the stomach,” he complained that the Society supplied too little food and wine and too much ritual and oratory for the high cost of the dinners. In his view, each diner should be served
two bottles of wine and two pounds of beef to assure that no one left the proceeding either “sober or hungry.” In response, Brown reminded Beebe that the Tastevin was founded to promote the culture and wine of Burgundy, not simply to eat and drink. Moreover, diners would have to pay higher fees for more food and wine. All the same, Beebe made his point. At the next dinner, Brown instructed the manager of the Hotel Pierre to serve Beebe a “larger portion” of fish.61

The mercurial Beebe had apparently changed his mind two years later. He reported in *Gourmet* that the spring 1949 Tastevin dinner at the Pierre Hotel under the direction of Chef Manuel Orta was “a gustatory tour de force which is still reverently spoken of by those who attended it.” The *Chateaubriand marchand de vin* (a butter sauce flavored with red wine and shallots) accompanied by a Clos de Vougeot 1937 was “the gustatory capstone of the evening” and caused Jules Bohy “to swoon presumably with rapture.” By giving “equal billing” to food and wine, Americans had outdone their French progenitors who made wines the focus of their dinners. Having abandoned his appeal for more food and drink, Beebe acclaimed Escoffier for eliminating the “indiscriminate profusion” of French cuisine in the nineteenth century so that diners could enjoy “a few perfect and harmonious dishes.”62
Every chapter of the Wine and Food Society engaged in culinary eclecticism, but none matched the WFSLA, which, within a month of its founding, promised that dinners would be “international in their scope, including menus and wines typical of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, etc.” While the Los Angeles group fully implemented its program, the WFSSF embraced a more restrained version of eclecticism, which the Society exhibited during a California dinner at the Palace Hotel featuring Alameda County wines for a dinner mixing Italian and French dishes.63

Among the biggest differences between the California societies and other WFS groups was the members’ involvement in cooking their own dinners and in weekend jaunts to California vineyards. Los Angeles held its first such dinner in 1936, followed a few months later by the San Francisco branch. These dinners promoted closer friendships between the members, while improving cooking skills. In 1939, the Los Angeles and San Francisco chapters joined forces for
their members’ dinner, prepared by chefs from both groups, at the Sonoma Inn as part of the vineyard tour. While amateur chefs were emerging on the East Coast at this time, none of them turned gourmet society events into an opportunity for a collective cooking enterprise.64

As World War II approached, however, the two societies began to go their separate ways. What drove them apart was the ignorance of the WFSLA members about French food and wines, based, in part, on the absence of established French restaurants in Los Angeles, whose chefs could instruct them. On one occasion, the chapter dropped plans to serve a Creole meal because the unnamed chef could not cook it. On another, John Shaw, who was responsible for organizing a Bordeaux dinner, proposed false labeling of one dish: “Any good, sound, and distinctive French dishes will do and we could attach a Bordelaise nomenclature to them.” A decade later, the chapter served the following menu at the Lakeside country club: deviled crabs en Ramequins à la Northeast harbor, Maine; vol au vent (round puffed pastry, but no filling specified); a Caesar salad (recently invented in Mexico); a Savoy surprise (no ingredients identified); and gin and tonic (on the beverage list). It was an odd pairing of dishes and drinks. Five years later at the Beverly Hills Hotel, menu planners put the cheese course immediately after the hors d’oeuvres and followed artichoke hearts with guava jelly. No wonder wine expert Roy Brady, a member of the WFSLA, remarked that “preciosity and rejoicing ignorance reach their finest flower” in the American branches of the WFS. Some have an “uncontrollable impulse to scatter ‘le’ and ‘la’ through the menu in wild abandon,” and to serve immature red wines. Brady was surely expressing the same frustration with the WFSLA approach to gourmet dining as the San Franciscans must have experienced fifteen years earlier.65

By contrast, the Wine and Food Society of San Francisco took great care in planning menus and evaluating wines. Wine experts educated other members in the etiquette of wine drinking and the standards for judging wines. To develop members’ taste, the wine committee held blind tastings. Often, wines were evaluated by numerical ratings and/or written and verbal comments. However, even the most reputable wines sometimes disappointed expectations.66

After the war, joint visits to California vineyards with the Los Angeles chapter were less frequent; the society also downplayed promotional activities for the California wine industry and established its own wine cellar. Tastings of California wines continued, but they were outnumbered by those devoted to French, German, and Italian wines, the latter arranged through the appropriate consulates to educate both members and guests. At the same time, the WFSSF gave increasing attention to gastronomy in France by sponsoring vintage tours in 1949
and 1952 that established links with gourmets on the East Coast and in France, thus helping to nationalize and internationalize the gourmet movement. By the late 1950s, membership in the WFSSF had become “one of the most sought-after distinctions in the city.”

The Dining Experience: Heirs to Brillat-Savarin

Mastering the skills necessary to cook gourmet meals, a core group of the Wine and Food Society of San Francisco took turns preparing dinners for each other or eating together in local restaurants. This group of a dozen or so members of the WFSSF was pioneering a model of gourmet dining that stood in stark contrast to the approach of the New York Tastevin. At their small, unofficial dinners, the San Franciscans adopted Brillat-Savarin’s vision of a dozen diners from diverse backgrounds gathering over a well-planned meal in a calm and attractive environment to experience the pleasures of the table and solidify friendships with each other. In the process, they prepared familiar dishes, experimented with new ones, and considered

Charles Pierre Mathé hosts selected members of the WFSSF at the Bohemian Club, November 5, 1940. The Wine and Food Society of San Francisco.
a variety of wine pairings with each dish. Joined by their appreciation of gourmet dining, the core group enlivened the official dinners of the WFSSF as well.68

Among the most active participants in this coterie was the honorary secretary of the WFSSF, attorney Harold Price, who kept a wine cellar at home and a library of culinary classics that he later lent to M. F. K. Fisher. Two dentists made different contributions to the group. George Selleck developed a national reputation as an amateur chef, while Raoul Blanquie, a good chef in his own right, was the son of the owner of Jack's, one of San Francisco's best French restaurants.

Paris-born Michel Weill, a charter member of the society and nephew of Raphael, founder of the White House Department Store in San Francisco, was an amateur gourmet only slightly less celebrated than his uncle. Other active members included James Howe, a journalist and gentleman farmer whose beat was Europe during and after World War I; Chaffee Hall, the founder of Hallcrest in 1941, a vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains that supplied wine to the Waldorf Astoria; Jeff F. Smith, a key figure in the evolution of the Cercle de l'Union; Robert Sproul, then president of the University of California; and attorney Farnham Griffiths, who served on the University's Board of Regents. In addition, Leon Adams, Maynard Amerine, and Salvatore Lucia, a wine researcher at the University of California, San Francisco, provided the society with significant expertise on wine.69

The success of this experiment in self-directed gourmet dining owed much to the culinary scene in San Francisco. As Julian Street noted, "the character of the people" of San Francisco created a hospitable site for gourmet dining that encouraged the proliferation of good restaurants staffed by fine chefs from whom chapter leaders learned much about French cuisine. The latter's competence was recognized by both Julian Street, who believed that the WFSSF was "doing the best of the lot [of WFS chapters]," and André Simon, who enthused that it "has gone from strength to strength."70

Following the practice of the two California societies, core members of the WFSSF featured a hands-on approach in a more intimate setting. Participants often contributed the ingredients for the dinner, toiled over the stove or the barbecue pit, and served the wines. Both James Howe and Chaffee Hall produced their own wine from grapes that they grew, and on occasion Howe brought to dinner pheasants that he raised. Meanwhile, George Selleck, Raoul Blanquie, and Maynard Amerine, all excellent cooks, often prepared dinners for six to ten friends. As for the traditional task of selecting and serving wines from their own cellars, Jeff Smith and Harold Price, among others, were happy to oblige.71

This hands-on approach and the growing esprit de corps in the society encouraged the transformation of dinner menus, especially those designed for
small, informal occasions attended by a core group of the society. So did the presence in the city of several art presses, especially the Grabhorn, and the interest of George Holl in designing innovative menus. Holl, art director for West Coast Fox theaters and a society member, had received the Julian Medal as a student at the Art Institute in San Francisco, lived in Paris for several years after World War I, and designed 121 menus for the WFSSF. These menus and others enhanced the pleasures of taste and smell associated with fine dining by exploiting the shapes and colors of food, wine, and the pastoral landscape where they were produced along with table settings to appeal to the visual sense of diners. Depending on the occasion, artists transformed the menu into an accordion, a wine cask butt, or a map of France. Unfortunately, the names of the printers and designers who followed Holl are not known (see color gallery).72

An excellent example of this artistry was a menu inserted in the folds of an accordion, an instrument commonly used in Italian popular music. In addition to the list of courses for an Italian dinner, the menu presented two scenes drawn in Italian Renaissance style, one depicting the production of wine in a rural setting, the other a dinner in Florence with the Palacio Vecchio in the background.

The man most responsible for the coterie’s energetic pursuit of the pleasures of the table was George Selleck. Both official postwar members’ dinners and smaller affairs that he hosted and attended reflected his influence. As one member remarked, “a dinner at [the] Sellecks is the perennial promise of a gastronomic adventure.” Often, however, Selleck shared the hosting responsibilities at friends’ homes, as when they entertained Alexander Woollcott, New Yorker drama critic, member of the Algonquin Circle, and the lead actor in Hart and Kaufman’s The Man Who Came to Dinner (1939). Serving as an invitation, the playbill announced that there would be no performance on March 31, 1940, because “the man who came to dinner is going out to dinner”—out indeed, to dine with members of the WFSSF at the home of James Howe. Apparently, Woollcott bristled when he heard that the festivities would continue until midnight and defiantly ordered his chauffeur to pick him up at 10 p.m. To his surprise, the meal was so delicious and his hosts so gracious that he stayed well past midnight to regale them with stories of Gertrude Stein and Eleanor Roosevelt, while the chauffeur waited in Howe’s driveway. The dinner itself was presented as a theatrical performance, with the cast including viticulturist Amerine and counselor Price. As chef, Selleck prepared a selle d’agneau au carré (saddle and breast of lamb) with which sommelier Raoul Blanquie paired a Chateau La Mission Haut Brion 1923. A Chambertin Charmes 1929 accompanied the fondue aux truffes de Franche Conté (Franche Conté truffle fondue).73
Accordion menu for a WFSSF Italian dinner, St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco, January 23, 1952. The Wine and Food Society of San Francisco. (For more WFSSF menus, see the color illustrations following page 128.)
In 1948, Selleck’s friends honored him with a dinner at the Bohemian Club, for which they designed a booklet entitled *The Bent Elbow* in appreciation of “his unselfish service as a dispenser of happiness and good food.” Aside from a blow-by-blow account of each item on the menu, the booklet satirized gourmet pretenses. Attorney Farnham Griffiths’ lament that gourmets only drink wine from labeled bottles and read menus written in French was illustrated by Ogden Nash’s “The Strange Case of Mr. Palliser’s Palate.” Nash mocked a gentleman gourmet who infuriated his wife by discussing such elaborate dishes as *Huîtres en Robe de chambre* (oysters in a bathrobe). After she scornfully invited him to Ham-burger Heaven, he found a recipe entitled “Croques Madame” in the cookbook and, following the instructions in the title, avenged himself.74

Even though the dinner was in his honor, Selleck prepared the hors d’oeuvres, while James Howe brought four pheasants for the soup from his own farm. For the main course, Chef Robert Hohman of the Bohemian Club served a *roti de sirloin, maître d’hôtel* (roast sirloin in savory butter with parsley and lemon juice) paired with a Richebourg 1937 Domaine de la Romanée Conti.75

A far different occasion was the dinner for Joseph Wechsberg, widely admired for his witty articles on fine dining in *Gourmet* and the *New Yorker*, which featured two Chateau Cheval Blanc Bordeaux and two Richebourg Burgundies that provided the “vinous interest” of the meal. Lulled by the wine, the diners “fell into a reminiscent mood” and recounted the experiences of their favorite dinners. For Wechsberg, it was a meal at Chef Fernand Point’s Pyramide restaurant, while Jeff Smith praised the Selleck dinner in honor of Woollcott.76

Meanwhile, Harold Price brought Chateau Cheval Blanc to the attention of Le Club des Arts Gastronomiques after a trip to Boston in the winter of 1942; on that occasion he was a guest at two of their dinners that “surpassed anything I had ever sat down to in the quality and number of wines.” Soon Price and wine dealer Russell Codman were corresponding about a possible wine tasting to compare 1920 vintages of Chateau Cheval Blanc and Chateau Latour. After Codman arranged the tasting for a Le Club dinner, he read Price’s letter to the tasters to celebrate the transcontinental connection between oenophiles. Dinners at Le Club and the WFSSF also honored Price for his promotion of high standards in wine tasting.77

In pursuit of the same goal, the WFSSF collaborated with the French Consulate to plan a tour of French vineyards. Ten members of the WFS, including five from San Francisco, as well as cookbook writer James Beard and his future collaborator Alexander Watt, visited the major wine regions of France. The latter two wrote lively accounts of the trip. According to Beard, theirs was “the most
comprehensive trip through France’s vineyards ever planned for laymen.” In twenty-two days, the group sampled over four hundred wines and was entertained officially on over thirty occasions. Even so, they returned to America happy and “with their digestive apparatuses working admirably.”

Thanks to connections with authorities in France, the group received VIP treatment from important figures in French wine circles. On one exceptional day, the travelers tasted great Medoc wines after an informal luncheon at the Jean Cruse chateau and before a “brilliant” dinner hosted by Philippe de Rothschild in the dining room overlooking his wine cellar. Two vintage Mouton-Rothschilds, the 1923 to accompany a contrefilet de boeuf bouquetière (beef tenderloin garnished with vegetables) and an 1881 with the cheese platter—“a great wine,” which had held up well—were served.

Only the “perfect meal” at La Pyramide surpassed the Rothschild feast. In “all his colossal grandeur,” the 300-pound owner, Fernand Point, and his wife shepherded the tour group through the meal. They enjoyed a volailles de Bresse en chaud-froid (chicken breast covered with mayonnaise and capped with truffles) and drank a Chateau Grillet 1947 before the main course: feuilletes de perdreaux Pyramide (thin slices of partridges baked in pastry) accompanied by a 1947 Beaujolais. As one member remarked, “There are many symphonies performed every day that are not played to music.”

When their French hosts visited California the next year, the WFSSF performed symphonies in a California key. The small dinner for Jean Cruse featured a garnished beef sirloin accompanied by a Fountaingrove cabernet sauvignon 1936. For Philippe de Rothschild and his traveling companion, Princesse de Liechtenstein, proprietor of the Moselle estates of Kesselstatt, who were touring California wineries with Frank Schoonmaker, the WFSSF served a crown of lamb with a Georges de Latour cabernet sauvignon private reserve 1943, followed by other California wines.

While wine often drove the Californians’ selection of dishes, there was considerable interest in experimenting with new recipes to expand the horizons of Society members. On one occasion, George Selleck cooked recipes from Gourmet author Samuel Chamberlain’s Bouquet de France (1952), which was also used by Farnham Griffiths as a tour guide. For the main course, Selleck prepared canards sauvages à l’ancienne (fricasseed wild duck with mushrooms and onions) accompanied by a Cheval Blanc 1934, one of four 1934 clarets served at dinner.

More than any other gourmet group, the core members of the WFSSF experienced the joys of consuming and producing great French food. An informal
apprenticeship in the WFSSF, where they learned much about French cuisine from San Francisco’s French chefs, prepared them for this experience; they were, no doubt, encouraged to cook for themselves by the example of Merle Armitage, Crosby Gaige, and Charles Browne, cookbook writers and amateur chefs from both coasts. Even so, the San Franciscans were among the first American men to practice gourmet cooking as a hobby and thus to anticipate the more modest middle-class, suburban barbecuers of postwar America. At the same time, they developed an expertise in French wines that gave them entrée into very select wine circles in Boston and France, which they visited and hosted. But what is unique about this coterie from the WFSSF is the way their comradeship in the kitchen and at the table nurtured the kind of social interaction that Brillat-Savarin had envisioned. In Raoul Blanquie’s words, the diners established “close and lasting friendships” that were based on a common appreciation “of the finer and civilized things of life.” Symptomatic of this growing intimacy was the inclusion of wives at small dinners despite the fact that the parent WFSSF admitted women only on ladies’ nights after 1943.83

In stark contrast, the New York Tastevin used medieval robes and appropriate props to convey a sense of a traditional environment as the setting for enjoying classical French cooking and the great wines of Burgundy. The Tastevin thus presents an interesting case of the appeal of ritual, hierarchy, and costumes to members and aspirants of the American upper class. It was, in reality, an invented tradition, borrowed from a variety of sources by the clever French founders of the Tastevin. Their American followers, in turn, accepted these practices because they enhanced the French culinary tradition that Americans hoped to acquire for their own purposes. Both the practices and the dining experience identified American members of the Tastevin as part of a long-standing elite descending from French gourmets to Thomas Jefferson, who distinguished themselves by their connoisseurship. At the same time, under Gordon Brown’s tutelage, they came to demand and to enjoy the fine cuisine that great French cooks in New York hotel restaurants were capable of producing.

While these two culinary success stories are significant, the establishment of an institutional structure for the promotion of gourmet dining is also an important legacy of the gourmet movement. It was a particularly bold move for André Simon to found six branches of his WFS in major American cities in the midst of the Depression and to locate American leaders who could in turn organize and run local chapters. The idea of using the dinner committees to educate the members was not entirely original, but it was ingenious. For the first time, dining societies became more than pleasant gatherings of their members.
They were now charged with initiating these members into the ways of fine dining.

This achievement required the energy and conviction not only of André Simon but of his French counterparts Jules Bohy and Joseph Donon, as well as Americans like Julian Street, Frederick Wildman, Gordon Brown, Roy Alciatore, and G. Selmer Fougner. It is true, of course, that the founders had a material interest in the success of the movement, but their work was often a labor of love. The wine dealers, restaurateurs, chefs, and journalists identified above were themselves devoted to good living, the camaraderie of the men's clubs, and the possibility of profiting from this venture. As such, they contributed their time and energy to assure the success of the movement. Together they recruited new members, sought subsidies for wine to accompany their dinners, and extolled the pleasures of the table.