The gourmet movement has had a substantial influence on the foodways of the growing professional and managerial classes in America. The dining societies and Gourmet raised the consciousness of these classes to the prospect of enjoying various ethnic cuisines, artisanal food and wine, the restaurants and shops where these products were available, and the home kitchens where gourmets could prepare their own dinners. Through its activities and publications, the movement also established a presence for gourmet dining that energized Julia Child, whose cooking lessons, in turn, attracted a much larger, yet still class-based, audience.

From the outset, however, the leaders of the gourmet dining movement were unclear about their goals. Early gourmet leaders and authors, including Earle MacAusland and André Simon, aspired to reach the masses as well as the classes by offering more traditional recipes for everyday meals to replace those published by the women’s magazines. These leaders advocated substituting fresh produce for canned goods and taking advantage of the full range of edibles to provide a more varied diet. They also encouraged their audience to spend more time in the kitchen making basic stews and soups, and more time at the table enjoying them. In addition, gourmet leaders advocated the use of table wines for cooking and as beverages. In this way, they sought to provide a reasonably priced alternative to the foodways of mainstream Americans, who relied increasingly on the food establishment in preparing their meals.

However, Simon and MacAusland also advocated the planning, execution, and recording of elegant dinners prepared in restaurants and clubs, which were designed by gourmet societies to instruct diners on the principles of gastronomy. Cost and other factors limited attendance at the dinners and the number of subscribers to Gourmet to the relatively affluent. During the twenty-five-year period following repeal, the message was clear. Enjoying an elaborate meal, rather than the transformation of the everyday foodways of the American people, was the overwhelming priority of gourmet diners and leaders. Even Julia Child and Simone Beck addressed the chef hostess who “on occasion” could put...
aside time and money to make a special dinner, although the processes they taught were useful for everyday meals. It is important, however, to consider the way these two different approaches to gourmet dining have played out over the last half century.¹

The most impressive activity in the realm of gourmet dining since 1961 has been the opening of a series of sophisticated restaurants, mostly in large American cities, by highly trained and talented professional chefs. As David Kamp has pointed out, many Americans would now find it difficult to even imagine “a world without celebrity chefs.” Inspiration for this movement came from post–World War II New York, where Henri Soulé’s Pavillon spawned a number of fine French restaurants in the 1950s. Following on the heels of Soulé and company, a new generation of chefs created restaurants of a different kind beginning in the late 1960s.²

Particularly notable was Alice Waters’ launching of an American version of nouvelle cuisine at Chez Panisse, her restaurant in Berkeley, California. In important ways, James Beard laid the groundwork for Waters through his own early cookbooks, especially *The Fireside Cookbook* (1949), and his work with Restaurant Associates in New York. There he contributed to making “The Four Seasons” into a self-consciously American restaurant that used American ingredients and preparations. He then promoted this “American” approach in *James Beard’s American Cookery* (1972).³

As a product of the 1960s’ counterculture, Waters regarded dining as both an outgrowth of community solidarity and an opportunity to forge that solidarity by joining with friends in a leisurely fashion to share a meal and enjoy each other’s company. Both Julia Child and Alice Waters admired French cooking, but Waters rejected *haute cuisine*, heavy sauces, the formal restaurant environment, and Julia’s idea of enabling housewives to cook French dishes from supermarket ingredients. Waters preferred, instead, the French country cooking she discovered in Elizabeth David’s cookbook by that name. Following David and the counterculture, she made arrangements with local farmers to supply her restaurant with fresh produce. Using local ingredients and offering California wines to her customers, she pioneered a California cuisine that provided a model for many other restaurateurs who wished to explore the possibilities of regional cooking in other parts of the country.⁴

Building on the work of Beard and Waters, a number of restaurateurs, most notably Larry Forgione, created a new American cuisine in the 1980s. At the River Café and An American Place, both in New York, Forgione served traditional American dishes such as spoon-bread griddlecakes, but with a new twist. The
garnish in this case was a duck sausage. Regardless of the dish, Forgione insisted on fresh ingredients, including, for example, buffalo raised by a farmer in northern Michigan. Other chefs and restaurateurs narrowed the focus from America to a region, as Alice Waters had done, and created a southwestern, a Pacific Northwest, and a New World cuisine based in Florida that emphasized Caribbean ingredients.5

While restaurants featuring French and American cuisine dominated the upscale restaurant scene, the proliferation of ethnic restaurants, many of them modest, broadened dining options for urban Americans. Already in the 1960s, Chinese, Indian, Italian, and Japanese restaurants, as well as sushi bars, appeared with increasing regularity. After 1970, Mexican, Cuban, Thai, and Vietnamese restaurants exposed Americans to an even greater diversity of ingredients and flavors and also stimulated an interest in fusion cuisine.6

Almost as spectacular as the restaurant scene was the parallel proliferation of cookbooks that attempted to foster an interest in cooking the ethnic cuisines now available in restaurants. Particularly notable in launching this trend were four cookbooks that appeared in the early 1970s: Diane Kennedy, *The Cuisines of Mexico* (1972); Marcella Hazan, *The Classic Italian Cook Book* (1973); Wonona W. and Irving B. Chang, *The Northern Chinese Cookbook* (1974); and Madhur Jaffrey, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* (1975). Inspired by Julia Child, their authors sought to teach home cooks, without access to the full array of indigenous ingredients, how to make authentic dishes from heretofore unfamiliar cuisines. In the process, the new cookbooks diverted some home cooks from their focus on French cooking. Once launched, the idea of using a cookbook to explore distant and exotic cuisines became increasingly popular, as evident in the deluge of such books, written by these authors and others over the last thirty years. While many home cooks must have read these manuals, it is quite likely that they prepared the recipes less frequently.7

Meanwhile, greater coverage of food news in periodicals, in restaurant guides, and on the Food Channel after 1993 has dramatically increased the visibility of various culinary enterprises. Based on the success of *Gourmet*, new periodicals such as *Bon Appetit*, *Food and Wine*, *Saveur*, and *Cook’s Magazine* have established themselves as competitors for the burgeoning audience of gourmet diners.8

Of particular interest is the earliest of these publications. Launched in November of 1956, *Bon Appetit: A Magazine of Good Taste* demonstrated the success of *Gourmet* while clarifying its class-specific appeal. At the outset, mostly midwestern liquor dealers, subsidized by advertisers of alcoholic beverages, distributed
the bimonthly periodical free of charge. Echoing Gourmet’s title with a simple French phrase, as well as Julia’s signature greeting on The French Chef, and practically duplicating the subtitle, Bon Appetit featured cover photographs of seasonal food, paired with wine, and travelogues presenting adventurous dining episodes in distant lands. However, contrary to Gourmet, the magazine advocated “informal” fare served at home by cooks who exploited time-saving methods, as recommended in an article entitled “The Epicure and the Can Opener.” Readers unable to afford Gourmet or its recipes could still pursue the good life through simpler recipes and learning how to drink wine. During its first five years, Bon Appetit thus illustrated Veblen’s claim that those lower in the social order would imitate the leisure class—in this case by finding more affordable and efficient ways to consume exotic dishes in a somewhat less conspicuous manner.9

More surprising were developments in the realm of television. Of course, Julia Child’s The French Chef and Graham Kerr’s The Galloping Gourmet had already shown that a knowledgeable cook could educate large audiences by presenting gourmet cooking lessons in an appealing manner. Even so, it was difficult to imagine that Americans would support a channel broadcasting only food programs. To reach a larger audience, the Food Channel shifted the orientation of the programs from cooking as education to cooking as entertainment. This formula helps to explain the popularity of Iron Chef, a Japanese program that made cooking into a competition between two chefs, who were assigned to make dishes from a single ingredient in a limited time. Judges then evaluated the quality of the dishes.10

In short, since the publication of Mastering the Art of French Cooking, the American culinary scene has changed dramatically with the emergence of a vibrant restaurant scene, the publication of a variety of ethnic cookbooks accessible to home cooks, the proliferation of gourmet magazines, and the popularization of gourmet cooking shows on television. Taken together, these changes, much like the gourmet movement from which they sprang, delivered an implicit and sometimes explicit challenge to the food establishment by asserting the importance of fresh ingredients, as well as small-scale, labor-intensive kitchen work in the preparation of high-quality meals.

However, as David Kamp has argued, the chefs, restaurants, cookbooks, and the new media that comprise this culinary scene minister primarily to the appetites of affluent Americans without affecting significantly mainstream foodways. Privileged Americans are eating better, while most families are more vulnerable than ever to the strategies of the food establishment. That is particularly the case in single-parent households and families with two working spouses,
where there is little time to prepare and eat nourishing dinners. In these families, gobbling fast food, deli takeout, or microwaved food on the run has become a daily reality. Such practices, in turn, help to account for the prevalence of eating disorders, obesity, and the obsession with dieting.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite the opposition, in principle, of the now seventy-five-year-old gourmet movement to nutritionism, the food establishment is just as dominant a force in shaping current American foodways as it has been for the past century. Particularly notable has been its success in reorienting food products to suit the needs of Americans who eat in a hurry. The variety of frozen dinners from pizza to Lean Cuisine that appeal to a wide range of customers and even gesture, in some instances, toward gourmet dining reflect the inventiveness of these processors. Equally important has been the proliferation of snack foods and soft drinks that rely on sugar or salt to please their consumers’ palates. And, of course, the fast food industry has excelled at satisfying the appetites of Americans from all walks of life.

The economic dominance of the food establishment is not its only source of power, however. Equally significant is the fact that even its many opponents analyze dietary issues in terms borrowed from nutritionism. As Michael Pollan has shown, Americans continue to calculate the micronutrients they consume as a measure of good health despite recent research that questions the benefits of micronutrients, especially when consumed as additives. Meanwhile, on the production side of the equation, food engineers continue to design more food products based on these same nutritional principles.\textsuperscript{12}

Pollan’s critique of nutritionism brings the discussion full circle to the early gourmet leaders’ attack on the food establishment. Like his predecessors, Pollan has urged readers to reject many processed foods and return to traditional diets. And, among those diets, he has strongly endorsed French cuisine as a model, in part because it has a long track record of success. As he points out, however, that success may be based on a number of factors in addition to the nutrients contained in French dishes and wines. Among them are the leisurely pace of dining, the focus on the taste of food, and the enjoyment of human interactions at the table, all of which have been part of the larger French culinary culture. These practices, he suggests, may be more responsible for the relative immunity of French diners from problems associated with consuming large quantities of fat than the special nutrients found in red wine.\textsuperscript{13}

Pollan’s analysis also suggests that American foodways suffer from the impact of historical factors that preceded the rise of the food establishment. As he points
out, France, in contrast to the United States, developed a national cuisine about two hundred years ago that improved both the health and welfare of the French people. It is pertinent, then, to note that the central themes of American history, including the overlapping traditions of individualism, Puritanism, the work ethic, and mobility, as well as ethnic diversity, served to fragment the society and block the creation of a national cuisine in the United States. Those living in diverse ethnic enclaves maintained inherited food traditions for a generation, or until they departed from their communities. Puritanism and the work ethic, which especially shaped the mind-set and behavior of old-stock, middle-class Americans, weakened the belief that food was anything more than a necessary fuel for the body; it was thus not a topic worth talking about. Furthermore, individualism discouraged the recognition of customs, traditions, and institutions, such as a national cuisine, that might shape the individual's choice of dietary options.

In this environment, cookbooks instructed middle-class Americans about appropriate dishes to serve on particular occasions and the best ways to prepare them. However, it was virtually impossible to have a conversation, written or oral, about the principles that normally underlie the creation of a national cuisine, such as the significance of food for individuals and groups or its role in promoting health, sensual enjoyment, and social interactions. As Sidney Mintz has argued, a cuisine is more than a “set of recipes” or “a series of particular foods.” It “requires a population that eats that cuisine with sufficient frequency to consider themselves experts on it.” Such a cuisine “has common social roots; it is the food of a community.” In that sense, all members of a society share in creating, enjoying, and conversing about a cuisine as it develops gradually over time. However, unless the community assumes that food has a value beyond its function as fuel, a conversation about its significance would seem pointless.

Given the grand themes of American history, it would have been difficult for citizens to agree on the underlying principles of a national cuisine. In its absence, the food establishment provided a powerful and convenient substitute that paid homage as well to the country’s utilitarian notions. At the same time, the failure to create a national cuisine facilitated the work of privileged Americans in selectively appropriating French culinary ideas and practices to make their dinners more interesting and enjoyable. As Mintz points out, it is possible for a society, which has no cuisine of its own, to borrow an *haute cuisine* from another country. Many affluent and well-born Americans from Jefferson to the robber barons, who appropriated French cuisine, demonstrated the truth of his assertion. Clearly, twentieth-century gourmets took their cues from these precursors.
The appeal of connoisseurship in the “land of equality,” where class distinctions are not always easy to recognize, accounts in considerable measure for the success of the gourmet dining movement. At a gourmet dining function featuring \textit{haute cuisine}, members could be sure that they were accruing cultural capital that would distinguish them from their mainstream compatriots. Accordingly, it made sense for the leaders of the gourmet dining movement, who wished to attract new members, to hold out in subtle ways the prospect of a higher place in the social order as a reward for participating in the movement. Such a prospect helped Simon lure some of his followers, who based their social activities in fine restaurants and exclusive men’s clubs that served elaborate meals and high-priced wines. In this way, gourmet dining often resembled the kind of conspicuous consumption that Veblen described in \textit{The Theory of the Leisure Class}.

The current restaurant scene appears to confirm Veblen’s theory. It offers an opportunity for diners to engage in a quest to discover exotic flavors introduced by skilled chefs and winemakers, who turn out new dishes and wines at a pace that resembles the production of fashion designers in the clothing industry. Among other things, this productivity, which yields a growing repertoire of interesting dishes and wines from around the world, at once satisfies the senses and offers an opportunity for consumers to demonstrate a kind of connoisseurship that can be translated into social advancement. As Leslie Brennan argues, in recent years, food is undeniably “chic.”

However, by exploiting the artistry of the French chef to satisfy the palates of relatively few affluent customers, the gourmet movement has exacerbated a divide in American society that will be difficult to bridge. Leaders of the movement have routinely organized large, splashy events in order to attract the attention of the press and better educate affluent outsiders who are potential members. This strategy has brought many of these individuals into the fold but furthered the impression that only elegant dinners with complicated menus are appropriate for gourmet diners. In creating this impression, gourmet leaders have given little thought to their earlier claims that the movement should challenge the food establishment by offering mainstream Americans a healthier and tastier alternative. In the midst of the current food crisis in America, this preference for grandiose dinners seems hard to justify.

Despite these worrisome trends, it is also important to pay attention to some hopeful ventures, which, if properly nurtured, could be the harbingers of change. As Warren Belasco has shown, the counterculture and its allies in the late 1960s proposed a countercuisine that emphasized the consumption of homegrown
produce as a healthy and tasty alternative to the products of the beef and food processing industries. Their support in 1977 for the efforts of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs to reduce the meat and dairy component in dietary guidelines narrowly failed when last-minute lobbying by representatives of the industry deep-sixed the original guidelines.17

Continuing their efforts in a different way, the recent proponents of organic farming have scored some important victories against the food establishment. To supply farmers’ markets, many local farmers now grow high-quality salad greens, peppers, and heirloom tomatoes. At the same time, the food establishment, ever mindful of the efficiencies of scale, has co-opted the marketing and sale of organic foods by establishing supermarket chains such as Whole Foods. Meanwhile, Alice Waters has tried valiantly to create a citizenry committed to a new food order through her Edible Schoolyard program in the public schools.18

On a somewhat different note, Josee Johnson and Shyon Baumann showcase the broad-minded approach of many gourmets, who reject the idea that only French cuisine is worthy of admiration. These new activists are eager to try exotic meats and produce, once scorned as “uncivilized,” from all corners of the globe. While this trend initially promised to diminish the “snob” factor surrounding other cuisines, the high costs of hunting, shipping, and producing the global cuisine make it affordable only to relatively wealthy diners. In this way, the snob factor returns through the back door. 19

One clear success story in broadening membership in the gourmet movement has been the admission of women to many gourmet societies. When gourmet leaders launched the movement in 1934, the gender exclusivity they preferred had governed the production of food since chefs ran the kitchens of the French monarchy, while women took charge of home cooking. Because gourmet societies in France, such as the Club des Cents, were open only to men, women founded Le Cercle des Gourmettes so that they too could enjoy fine cuisine on a separate, if not equal, basis. Not surprisingly, Americans institutionalized these practices in most of their own gourmet dining societies. However, the consequences of this division were greater in the United States than in France, where home cooks used recipe books written by the great chefs, while their American counterparts relied primarily on the food articles in women’s magazines. Moreover, beginning in 1900, the regional cuisine movement in France gave recognition to home cooks who used their skills to cook for the public. By contrast, it was 1961 before Julia Child introduced French recipes that were accessible to American home cooks. In so doing, she not only brought American women into the production end of gourmet activity but also appealed to men who found this
kind of challenge worthy of their time and efforts. In recent years, the barriers to women chefs in restaurants have begun to recede, and a number of gourmet societies now routinely admit women.

Despite these important successes, the task of rescuing America from the excesses of fast food and lavish dinners will not be a simple one. It is clear, however, that progress will only be possible if the food establishment and the gourmet dining movement play more socially constructive roles in the future. In its early days, the food establishment contributed to the welfare of Americans by supplying cheap food, while remedying problems of sanitation in the meatpacking industry and elsewhere. However, in the last half century these same food processors have become the single greatest threat to the health of the American people. So serious is this problem that it will surely require strong government regulation as one remedy. Over time, perhaps, food processors will be able to return to their original mission of supplying safe food at low prices.

In a similar fashion, gourmet leaders might consider returning to the vision of André Simon and Earle MacAusland that preceded their exclusive promotion of elegant and often extravagant dinners. Their claim that a simple peasant dinner could meet the standards of gourmet dining as well as or better than a sumptuous meal with a proliferation of dishes, sauces, and wines promised a more inclusive approach to dining. Using such a guideline for planning gourmet dinners would benefit rich and poor alike and thus bridge the gap between social classes in a way that seems appropriate to a democratic society. In addition, it would provide a welcome update to Brillat-Savarin’s idea that a gourmet dinner should become the occasion for including diners from diverse backgrounds who would bond in the course of enjoying fine food and leisurely conversation.

To address the current problems of American foodways, the time is thus ripe for the leaders of the gourmet movement to take up the founders’ cause and use their knowledge to propose dishes, cooking processes, and settings for dinners that are affordable, appealing to the palate, and conducive to greater social conviviality. They might take as their mission the restoration of appetite to eating, flavor to food, and pleasure to the dining experience not just for their members, but for all Americans.20

To accomplish this task, they would have to address the great confusion about dietary standards in virtually every segment of American society. This confusion has been sewn in part by the food establishment without significant opposition from members of dining societies. One response to this crisis is to launch a dialogue about the creation of an American cuisine. For starters, such a conversation would need to consider the kind of government regulation of the food
industry that would alleviate the pollution of the land and of the digestive tracts of American citizens and focus that industry on producing cheaper, tastier, and healthier food.

Meanwhile, dining societies and gourmet magazines might consciously turn their energies to the creation of a healthy, appetizing dining culture in the United States. They could do so by modeling simpler meals based on fresh ingredients and modest wines that would be more accessible to middle-class Americans. They might also search for a more diverse membership or subscriber list and give more attention to the meal as a means to the end of social conviviality. These would be small steps that could, over time, contribute to changing the current dining scene.

In the end, the creation of a national cuisine would diminish the confusion that characterizes our culinary situation at present and increase the likelihood of finding a consensus that reflects the best judgments of the citizenry and food experts about the role of food in American society. Well-respected cooks, cookbook and food writers, grocers, nutritionists, and farmers could use the media to present their version of a national cuisine. A conversation about this subject would aim to reach a consensus about underlying principles, while socializing Americans to the idea that fine dining is beneficial far beyond its role in fueling the body for everyday purposes. The creation of such a cuisine would also address the limitations of nutritionism along with schemes for rapid weight reduction. Finally, once the underlying assumptions of fine dining have been addressed, experts might turn to helping citizens select and prepare recipes that would further the original goals of the gourmet dining movement.
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