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978-0-521-82199-5 - A Revolution in Taste: The Rise of French Cuisine, 1650-1800

Susan Pinkard

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PART I



Before the Culinary Revolution

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CHAPTER 1

The Ancient Roots of Medieval Cooking

THE TASTE FOR COMPLEXITY

This book aims to explain how and why it was that cooking, eating, and drinking in seventeenth-century France took a radically different turn from the standards of wholesomeness and good taste that had dominated European culinary traditions for more than two millennia, creating the foundations of the styles of cooking we know and appreciate today. In order to grasp the scale and scope of this transformation, we must first explore the ideas and practices concerning the preparation and consumption of food that dominated kitchens all over Europe from ancient times to the Renaissance.

As Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari have pointed out, the aesthetic of modern European cooking (which first emerged in France and then took root in other parts of the continent and the British Isles) is analytic. That is, it

tends to *distinguish between* flavors (sweet, salty, tart, sour, or spicy) reserving a separate place for each, both in individual dishes and in the order of courses served at a meal. Linked to this practice is the notion that the cook should respect as much as possible the *natural* flavor of each food: a flavor that is distinct and different should be kept separate from other flavors.¹

Thus, the modern cook aims to capture the taste, texture, and aroma of principle ingredients and uses sauces and seasonings to compliment these without disguising them. From this point of view, the success of any dish rests primarily on the quality of the main ingredient (whether this is an artichoke, a salmon trout, or a roast of veal), and a good cook's special skill resides in her ability to highlight the character of fine foodstuffs.

¹ Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, *Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History*, translated by Aine O'Healy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 86.

The cuisines of the ancient Mediterranean took an approach that was the opposite of this modern one: they revolved around a preference for complex, multi-layered flavors that were achieved through the prolific use of strong seasonings, and they favored modes of preparation and presentation that transformed the taste, texture, color, and shape of principal ingredients. The aim was to turn raw materials of all sorts into confections unlike anything in nature:

A perfect dish was thought to be one in which *all* flavors were simultaneously present. The cook was expected to perform an intervention on “natural” products by altering their traits, sometimes in a radical way. Cooking was perceived as an art of combination that aimed at modifying and transforming the “natural” taste of foods into something different or “artificial.”²

Cuisine *was* artifice: perfection was achieved when flavors fused so completely that it was hard to guess what the individual components were.

This idea of cuisine as a transformative art and the love of spicy complexity that went along with it were not unique to the ancient Mediterranean world. Throughout human history most of the great culinary traditions of the world have been marked by their taste for deep, layered flavors that fuse many ingredients and seasonings. We experience and appreciate this culinary aesthetic today in the cuisines of Mexico, North Africa and the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, southeast Asia, and many parts of China. The quality of cooking in Indian homes is often judged by the subtlety of custom-ground spice mixtures that give each dish a unique taste that cannot be traced to any single seasoning. Mexican kitchen lore claims that if one can identify a recipe’s ingredients by smelling the steam rising from the pot, the mixture must cook longer to achieve a perfect blend of flavors.³

Fernand Braudel, the great historian of everyday life, pointed out long ago that the dominant taste for spicy complexity is linked to the fact that most people in most of the world have always consumed most of their calories in the form of cereals and legumes. He quoted a Hindu poet as saying, “When the palate revolts against the insipidness of rice boiled with no other ingredients, we dream of fat, salt, and spices.”⁴ Rice, beans, noodles,

² Ibid., pp. 86–87.

³ Author’s conversation with Rick Bayless, cookbook writer and chef-proprietor of Topolobampo and the Frontera Grill in Chicago, January 22, 2002.

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, translated by Siân Reynolds, vol. 1 of *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th-Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 220.

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porridges, breads, and corn *masa* are bland in themselves, but they make excellent carriers for other flavors. Sauces and condiments concocted from small amounts of meats or fish, vegetables, herbs, spices, and fats transform bland starches into delicious foods of infinite variety. Complex, spicy cooking relieves the monotony of diets dominated by carbohydrates.

The aesthetic preference for strong seasonings in ancient Mediterranean cooking was associated with the dominant role of cereals in the diet: barley, which grew well in Greece; wheat from the region of the Black Sea and Sicily; and millet, chestnuts, and other “minor grains” that varied from place to place according to the topography and climate. As we shall see, medical theory also played a significant role, because it was widely agreed that health was preserved or restored by the calculated modification of basic foodstuffs by seasonings that rendered them easily digestible and amenable to the constitution of the person for whom they were prepared. Finally, culinary practices that strove to transform the fundamental character of principle ingredients were perceived as one of the markers that separated civilized peoples from barbarians. When, in the fifth century BC, the Greek geographer and historian Herodotus tried to convey the otherness of the nomadic tribes who lived beyond the Black Sea, he explained that they drank the milk yielded by their herds (instead of making it into cheese, in the Greek manner) and that they ate huge joints of meat roasted and seasoned only with salt – a practice that recalled the legendary past described by Homer but was foreign to the Greek kitchen of classical times, which featured fish, small cuts of meat and poultry, and vegetarian foods that were often highly seasoned and elaborately sauced.⁵ The Greeks of Herodotus’s day, like their Persian adversaries and their Roman heirs, ate foods that had been unmistakably altered – and civilized – by the artistry of the cook.

This approach to cooking endured in Europe for a very long time, spanning the rise and fall of Rome, the incorporation of Germanic and Celtic food traditions, the opening of Latin Christendom to the influence of Islamic civilization during the Middle Ages, and even the discovery of the Americas. Patterns of consumption and styles of preparation changed to accommodate various cultural traditions and regional differences, the religious imperatives of Christianity and Islam, and the introduction of many foods that were unknown or at least unfamiliar in the ancient Mediterranean. The pungent, sweet-sour flavors that dominated the kitchens of Greece and Rome carried over into the cooking of Latin Christendom. Aromatic spices paired with sweet ingredients dominated the elite cooking of the High and

⁵ Phyllis Pray Bober, *Arts, Culture, and Cuisine: Ancient and Medieval Gastronomy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 82–84, 85, 87, and 114.

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late Middle Ages. This type of cuisine became even more pronounced in the sixteenth century, when supplies of sugar and exotic seasonings increased in the wake of the voyages of the Portuguese, Columbus, and other explorers. The tables of the High Renaissance combined sweet, perfumed dishes with ingredients believed to have been popular in ancient Rome, including mushrooms, cockscombs, and organ meats. But all of these stylistic variations were the products of the same broad school of thought about what turned foodstuffs into cuisine. In their embrace of complexity and artifice, the cooking of the ancient Mediterranean and of medieval and Renaissance Europe could not have been more different from the approach to cooking that emerged in seventeenth-century France, which aspired to the ideals of naturalness and simplicity.

HIPPOCRATIC MEDICINE AND DIETETICS

From ancient Greece to Renaissance Europe, the culinary aesthetic that privileged artifice and the creation of complex flavors was buttressed by ideas about the role of diet in preserving health and curing disease associated with the Hippocratic school of medicine. Hippocrates was a Greek physician, a native of the island of Cos, whose dates are traditionally given as circa 460–337 BC. The corpus of sixty or so texts on medicine associated with his name were certainly the work of many different authors. Composed in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, they were assembled into single collection around 250 BC in the library of Alexandria, which was the great center of Greek learning in the Hellenic age.⁶ Hippocratic ideas and practices spread to Italy via the Greek colonies in Sicily and the southern part of the peninsula, and by the second century BC, émigré Greek physicians had attracted a fashionable clientele in Rome itself and eventually became naturalized throughout the Roman world.⁷ Hippocratic attitudes about health, disease, and diet persisted in folk remedies even after learned medicine went into decline in the wake of Germanic migration and settlement. In the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and Spain, Muslim and other Arabic-speaking physicians (including

⁶ On Hippocrates and the Hippocratic corpus, see Henry E. Sigerist, *A History of Medicine*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), vol. 2, pp. 260–295; and E. D. Phillips, *Aspects of Greek Medicine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), pp. 38–121.

⁷ On the reception of Greek physicians and Hippocratic ideas and practices in Rome, see Ralph Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (Norman, OK, and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), pp. 9–31.

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the Jewish rabbi Moses Maimonides) became the principal inheritors of the Hippocratic intellectual tradition, which they refined, reinvigorated, and reintroduced to Latin Christendom beginning in the eleventh century. Half a millennium later, Renaissance humanists revived a series of Hippocratic texts and focused anew on the theory of dietetics that they contained.⁸ Thus, ideas about the role of food and cooking in maintaining health and curing disease that originated in ancient Greece continued to shape culinary practices on the cusp of modernity.

The key insight of the Greek physicians associated with the origin of the school was that the human body was ruled by the same laws as the cosmos. At a time when supernatural explanations and magical cures were routinely invoked in matters of health and disease, they insisted that medicine was a rational science, using the same tools of logical reasoning and empirical observation that helped men to understand the natural world.⁹ Furthermore, they argued that the body was composed of exactly the same kinds of matter that constituted everything else in the cosmos. The philosopher Empedocles had taught that matter consisted of four elements – earth, air, water, and fire. Hippocratic physicians accepted this idea and theorized that the body was composed of four vital fluids or humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm) that correlated with the four elements (air, fire, earth, and water, respectively) as well as the four seasons of the year (spring, summer, fall, and winter) and the four qualities of moisture, heat, dryness, and cold.¹⁰ (See Illustration 1.)

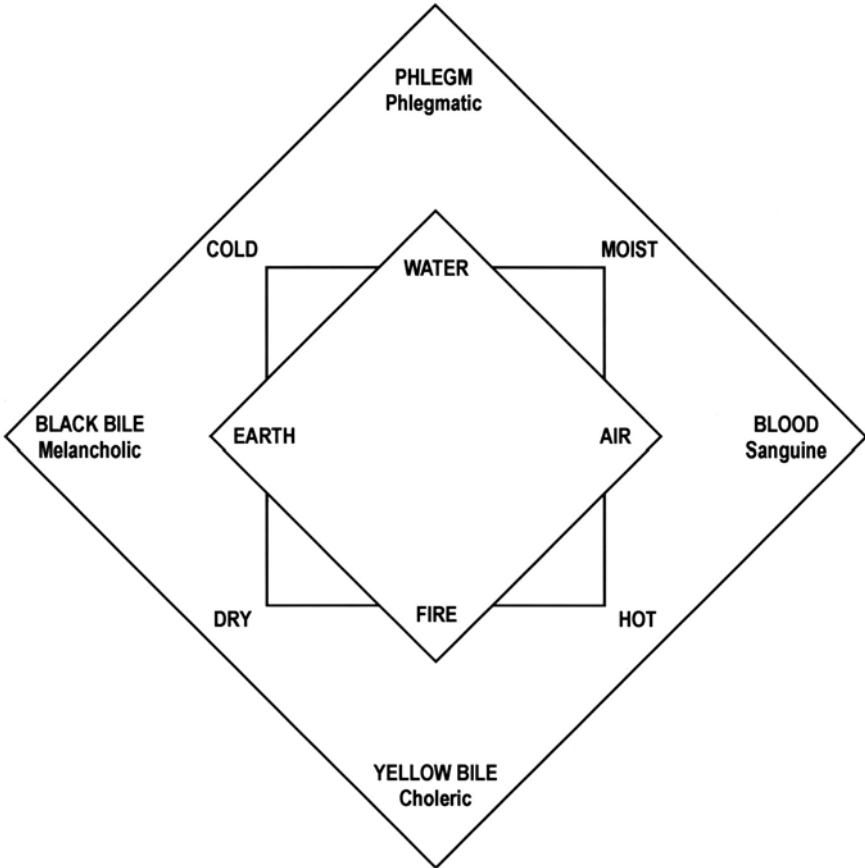
When the four humors were in equilibrium with each other in terms of strength and quantity and when they were perfectly blended throughout the body, health prevailed. However, if too much or too little of one of the humors was present or if it became separated from the others, illness resulted. Sometimes a humor became concentrated in a single organ or extremity of the body, causing localized pain and inflammation.¹¹ For example, coughs were caused by a flow of phlegm from the head to the lungs.

⁸ Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1997), pp. 106–109 and 168–176; and Nancy Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 7–16.

⁹ Porter, *Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, pp. 55–56.

¹⁰ Sigerist, *History of Medicine*, vol. 2, pp. 279 and 318–320. On the Empedoclean foundation of the Hippocratic theory of the humors, see Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 489.

¹¹ Sigerist, *History of Medicine*, vol. 2, pp. 319–321.



1. The four humors, four elements, and four qualities according to Hippocratic medical theory.

The searing pain and swollen joints symptomatic of gout were the result of the defluxion of humors to the feet. Mental illnesses were also attributed to disequilibrium of various sorts. Mania was caused by an excess of fiery yellow bile in the brain, whereas melancholy resulted from a constitution dominated by earthy black bile.¹² Hippocratic physicians believed that imbalance among the humors could be caused by many different factors, including trauma to the body, unsuitable food or drink, and changes in the weather. It was observed, for example, that cold winter temperatures correlated with an upsurge in diseases caused by phlegm, whereas fevers and diarrhea, which were linked to hot yellow bile, proliferated during the

¹² Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 323–324; and Porter, *Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, pp. 56–57.

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summer.¹³ Because the humors corresponded to the elements and the cardinal qualities, “it was possible to establish a direct relationship between the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the organism and to link them up with the atmospheric changes due to the seasons.”¹⁴ Thus the humors constituted an elegant theory of health and disease, satisfying in its symmetry and ability to fully integrate man into the natural world.

In terms of clinical practice, the theory of the humors gave physicians a means of uniting empirical observations and the case histories of individual patients (a concept invented by Hippocratic physicians) with a causal framework.¹⁵ Furthermore, by conceiving of illness as disequilibrium within the body and pairing humors with opposite qualities (cold phlegm and hot yellow bile, moist blood and dry black bile), the theory also suggested remedies and preventative therapies that could be used to restore or preserve health – an invaluable asset for practicing physicians, whose patients hoped for relief to follow in the wake of diagnosis. Although techniques that aimed to evacuate excess humors (purges, vomits, and bloodlettings) were fundamentals of Hippocratic medicine, physicians preferred to minimize the chances of patients falling ill by prescribing a hygienic regime tailored to the age, sex, and constitution of each individual.¹⁶ Such regimes regulated patterns of sleep, exercise, elimination, sexual activity, and diet in a manner calculated to achieve equilibrium of the humors. Although all these aspects of daily life contributed to the balance that was essential to health, diet was subject to the greatest variation. Food and drink thus became focal points in the care of the self, the single most important branch of treatment as conceived by Hippocratic physicians.

At the heart of the classical theory of dietetics lay the principle “that contraries could be cured by contraries.”¹⁷ One offset the phlegm-maximizing effects of cold, wet winter weather by eating foods that were dry, such as roasted meat, and by drinking wine mixed with a minimum of water. Summer heat called for moist and cooling foods, such as thin barley gruel, raw vegetables, and meats and fish that were poached in water.¹⁸ Individuals of melancholy disposition were advised to eat foods that countered black bile because they were light in color or by association – for example, small birds whose flesh was pale and whose natural element was

¹³ Sigerist, *History of Medicine*, vol. 2, pp. 323–324.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

¹⁵ Porter, *Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, p. 58.

¹⁶ Phillips, *Aspects of Greek Medicine*, pp. 77–80 and 85–87; and Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire*, pp. 20–22 and 70–73.

¹⁷ Sigerist, *History of Medicine*, vol. 2, p. 322.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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the air. Choleric and lustful temperaments could be corrected by diets that omitted most meats – an idea that would outlive Greco-Roman antiquity and flourish in the monastic societies of the Christian Middle Ages.¹⁹ And so on.

Physicians evaluated foodstuffs according to two separate sets of criteria. The first of these categorized foods according to their “strength,” that is, the amount of nourishment they provided to human beings. The strongest class of foods included “bread, pulses, the meat of large game and domesticated animals, large birds, ‘sea monsters’ (including whale), honey, and cheese; to the middle class [belonged] smaller game, birds, fish, and pots herbs whose roots or bulbs were eaten; and to the weakest class vegetables, fruit, olives, snails, and shellfish.”²⁰ Within categories, individual specimens could range in strength according to the qualities of the environment in which they were raised, the age and sex of animals, cuts of meat, processing and cooking methods, and many other factors.²¹ People who engaged in physical labor or strenuous exercise were thought to flourish on a diet dominated by strong foods, while intellectuals and the idle rich were advised to eat more ingredients of medium or weak strength.²²

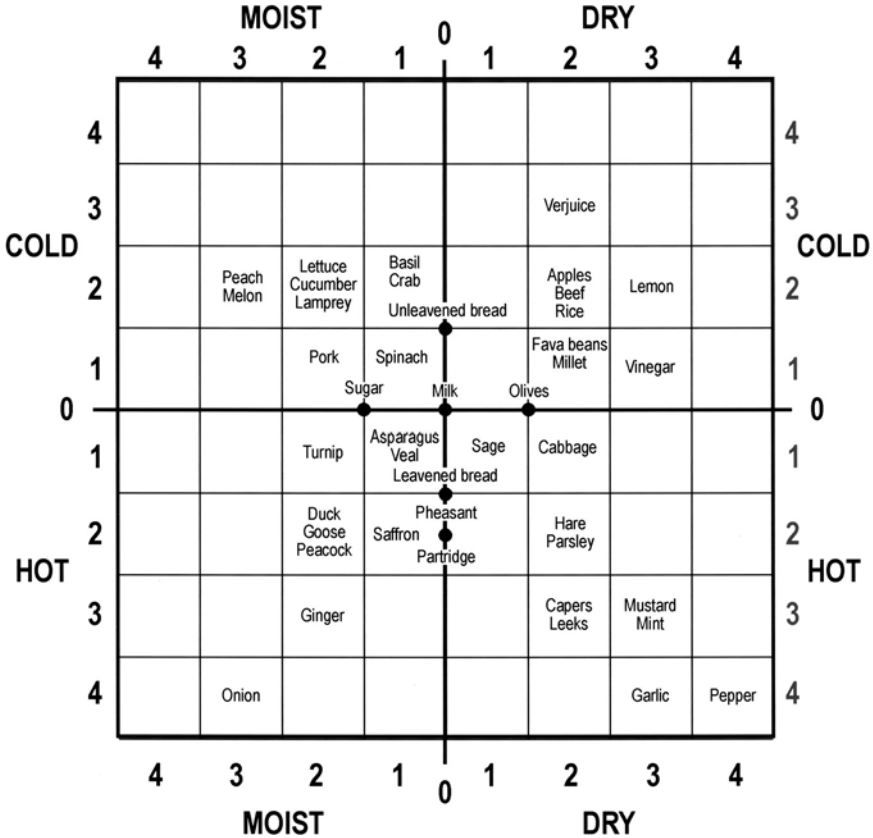
Foodstuffs were also classified according to their elementary composition: an item was thought to be cold, moist, warm, or dry according to the amounts of earth, water, air, and fire it contained. (See Illustration 2.) For example, partridge and pheasant were perfectly balanced between dry and moist but were warm in the second degree; duck, goose, and peacock were as warm as these game birds, but were two degrees wetter, whereas beef and hare were two degrees drier. Pork was cold to the first degree and moist to the second. The most neutral meats were veal and goat (one degree each of warmth and humidity). Fish and seafood varied enormously according to variety and mode of preparation, from very warm to very cold; counter-intuitively, some fish, such as tuna, were considered to be dry. Vegetables and fruits were also all over the chart, ranging from sour cherries (cold in the third degree, dry in the second) to melons (cold in the second degree, moist in the third) to onions (moist in the third degree, hot in the fourth) to garlic (hot in the fourth degree, dry in the third). Fresh milk was the only

¹⁹ Innocenzo Mazzini, “Diet and Medicine in the Ancient World” in *Food: A Culinary History*, edited by Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanardi, English edition by Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 141–152; and Porter, *Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, pp. 57–58.

²⁰ Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire*, p. 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mazzini, “Diet and Medicine in the Ancient World,” pp. 146–147.



2. The qualities of foodstuffs according to Hippocratic dietetics.

common foodstuff that achieved perfect balance of the elements, although fine white bread and sugar came close. Indeed, many physicians believed that the balanced composition of sugar had a neutralizing effect on other foodstuffs with which it was combined, rendering them nourishing and easy to digest even for the infirm, the very old, or the very young.²³ Herbs and spices were considered to be warming (four degrees for pepper, three degrees for mustard, one degree for sage); with a few exceptions, they were thought to be drying as well.²⁴ As many generations of Hippocratic

²³ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London and New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 96–99 and 244–246. See also M. Levy, *Early Arabic Pharmacology* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), p. 74.

²⁴ Bruno Lauriou, *Manger au moyen âge: pratiques et discours alimentaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Paris: Hachette, 2002), p. 140. For additional details see Mazzini, “Diet and Medicine in the Ancient World,” pp. 146–147.