

1989: A. J. Liebling's Writings on Paris and Food

A.J. Liebling's essays on Paris originally written for *The New Yorker*, appeared most recently in a fetching little book produced by North Point press in Berkeley. The publisher cast Liebling's memoirs (they are personal accounts of the author's love affair with food, wine, and pretty women) on acid-free paper. It's a good thing; we need some permanent record of the cuisine of the 20's when prices were exquisitely low and quality deliciously high.

Liebling displayed a refreshingly uninhibited pleasure in his lifelong dalliance with fine food from bistro meals to dinners in astral establishments. It was still acceptable for a gentlemen to display the results of good dining by a broadened girth. (Already the ideal female shape had shrunk from the ample curves of Lillian Russell to the slat-flat figure of the flapper.) Liebling fed his image well and without concern for consequences. As he says, many French men and women lived to a fine old age oblivious to any harm caused by happily consuming enormous quantities of rich food and wine, or they did before someone made those things a focus of all maladies.

Now preoccupied with their livers, not to mention a dozen other diseases not suffered elsewhere such as ennui and malaise, the French pick at their food, look bored because it is dreadfully unfashionable to really care about food, and spend thousands of francs at spas to restore their innards. It's true, lots of Parisians look like they are suffering some kind of liver ailment, but if you rarely saw the sun and breathed polluted air, you might look that way, too.

That accounts for the French who have the francs to explore the fine restaurants that are left. But when a bistro meal can cost 360 French francs (\$60), what are the rest of them eating? The home cooking of Madame Maigret or the corner restaurant that was the extension of everyone's flat essentially is gone in Paris. There's a lot of fast food in France. The French are enchanted with McDonalds, with croissant sandwiches, with crêpe stands. They're enchanted with the Americans, poor souls—that is they are enchanted with American life on a selective basis, taking the music, the clothes, the food. They don't want the problems. In this bicentennial year of the French Revolution, what's become of French cuisine or indeed of Liebling's Paris?

That "what's become of ..." question, of course, has been asked many times since 1789. France has been through three or four quasi monarchies, anarchy, and five republics since then, and the same lament has gone up each time. French

food and dining have evolved, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. But Liebling's Paris lives in his essays and they're worth reading for a sense of quality and for the keys they give us to truly caring about the details of fine ingredients and techniques.

One might like to see restaurants like those Liebling frequented frozen in time. There's a danger in that approach, which authors like Giuliano Bugliagli and Diana Kennedy have embraced, which turns a living cuisine into an archaeological dig or an anthropological field trip. On the other hand, it's easy to freeze an imagined menu or setting until it is unreal and "Williamsburged." Was it really like that? Not really! On some nights the terrine de campagne was undersalted and some days one could see a chip of paint gone from the wainscoting. Even at the best and most abundant, the food life of Paris was as organic and evolutionary as the very ingredients that made it up.

Gastronomically, France has evolved as a mirror of its social revolution. Since I find neither evolution nor change to be good in and of themselves, I'd rather not take the changes that have occurred in France as inevitable and desirable. It's just too easy to lament the passing of beautiful things, be they buildings, trees, or food, with a shrug. It is the lazy way out. The question remains: How do the French view all this? Is this a case where the occasional visitor and Francophile laments the passing of the good old days, viewing the country through a cosmetic haze, resulting in a perception of something that never has existed? Let's have a look at real France to see why all this has come about.

The abundance of wonderful food in Liebling's France was a result of regional suppliers vending to regional consumers. Everything was fresh because it didn't have to go far. And it couldn't go far because it would spoil if it did. Food was regional because there had not yet occurred that homogenization of supplies that came with the destruction Les Halles in Paris and the creation of a national food-distribution system at Rungis. The pace was slower, transportation made it impossible to consider driving from Paris to Avignon in one day. There was no reason why one should not stop for a leisurely lunch if one only expected to get to Beaune by nightfall (or even Auxerre). Too, those who travelled had the wealth to support longer, more leisurely trips. It was not necessary to frenetically pack everything into a week or two.

Certainly the rise of alternate professional opportunities for women pulled many of them out of the kitchen, be they housewives or bistro cooks. The same phenomenon destroyed careers in household service in England. Once an alternate career was possible and was pursued, there was little time for carefully

tending to daily marketing or shepherding long-braised dishes. I do not count this as greed or selfishness on the part of the women who no longer cooked. Some were remarkably creative persons who had fresh opportunities to explore areas previously closed to them.

Time is a factor in daily life is certainly an element in the change of French cuisine. When someone works a full day at a job, one cooks simpler meals, shops less, eats out, cares less about the place of food in one's life. After all, there's ample evidence that some more complicated protracted home cuisine is the product of socialization. It is something a home cook can do to make herself seem more significant in the life of her family. When other significant activities become accessible—and more respected by her peers, the production of fine meals loses some of its appeal and value.

Yet a greater pressure on home cuisine was an economic one. Liebling's meals cost him relatively little compared to food costs today. I remember friends telling us about treat dinners purchased in France in 1932 for \$2. Inflation accounts in part for our nostalgia for 1920s prices. At a time when a salary of \$30 a week was fairly common, the cost of that \$2 meal took on a different light. The balance of costs may change somewhat as one food becomes more plentiful and another more scarce, but if you apply a multiplier across a large number of items, today's prices might not seem so outrageous.

How, then, do we sample good food comparable to that of Liebling's Paris? Do recipes recorded by various teachers, cooks, chefs, reflect the quality of food or the kind that he cherished? Not as frequently as one might think, I suspect. If one does a comparative study of Boeuf à la Mode across a wide range of recipes published by well-known French chefs or Francophone writers, one finds in most cases a glorified version of a simple dish or a simplified version of a glorious one. That is, either a restaurant chef has applied his own haute cuisine background and experience to gild the lily somewhat—fancy touches to the sauce, more costly ingredients, finely turned vegetables for garnish, or some writer has taken a fine dish that requires infinite care, patience and cut steps to make it appear easier for a reader who is threatened by fine ingredients or more than a page of instructions.

You can't cook those wonderful old dishes just once in a while and do them exquisitely. Like fine pastry makers or plastic surgeons, the best practitioners of good cuisine, be it *campagne*, *bourgeois*, or *haute*, do it constantly. Those dishes cannot be speeded up or rushed. Those bourgeois dishes from Liebling's favorite bistrots took the care and talent of men and women who cooked them daily or

weekly. Few home cooks get in that deep anymore in the U. S. or in France. Most of us, even if we care passionately about food, are jacks of all trades. We have a repertoire of dishes and techniques, but we're likely to experiment with some other culture's food more frequently than our predecessors, trying that one night, Italian the next, Thai the next, and a grilled hamburger the next.

Is there a way to sample the food and life of Liebling's Paris? Yes and no. Frequenters of Paris have their little secret. You can read memoirs by knowledgeable writers like Robert Courtine, Robert Noah, George Ridge, or Patricia Wells to know that good places can still be found. Some of the best of these places cost a small fortune to dine in; others are wonderfully reasonable secrets. It takes an effort to ferret them out. As for home cuisine in France, the French are as obsessed with their health and watching their weight as anyone else—at least the French in the major cities. The girth expands a bit when you get into *la France profonde*. We can reproduce these dishes only if we are willing to find the artisanal cheeses, hams, sausages; the best fish, vegetables, and wine — and at the best prices. Otherwise we will only produce a cheap imitation that resembles the original in name only. We much teach not only how to cook but how to discern quality in ingredients and how to conserve them once acquired, and we must develop a sense of taste and appreciation that knows and enjoys superb quality. It's a long exercise in comparative tasting, but it's worth it.

As for bringing back Liebling's France, we can't do it any more than we can bring back the France of Napoleon. Yes, the haute cuisine experts will always be there, but what of the bourgeois or the country folk? We can try to express to French friends our perception of this great national treasure of cuisine that they are losing. Whether we will manage to reintroduce them to their own heritage and show them that it's marketable and something to be proud of is another question.

Madge Griswold