A Plea for Culinary Modernism:

Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food

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Modern, fast, processed food is a disaster. That, at least, is the message conveyed by newspapers and magazines, television cooking programs, and in prize-winning cookbooks. In a rush of sophistication to browbeat the steel folder mill and supermarket bread while purveying for straw-ground flour and brick ovens, we seek out heirloom apples and pumpkins while despising modern tomatoes and hybrid corn: to be hostile to automatists who develop high-yielding modern crops and to home economists who invent new recipes for General Mills. We hover between indolence and shame when we remember how our mothers and grandmother enthusiastically embraced canned and frozen foods. We nod in agreement when the waiter proclaims that the restaurant showcases the freshest local produce. We shun Wonder Bread and Coca-Cola. Above all, we laud the great celebrating symbol of Culinary Modernism, McDonald's—modern, fast, homogenized, and international.

Like so many of my generation, my culinary style was created by those who scorned industrialized food. Culinary Luddites, we may call them, after the English industrial workers of the nineteenth century who adhered to the machines that were destroying their traditional way of life. I learned to cook from the book of Elizabeth David, who urged us to sweep our chef's cupboards "clear for use of the chattering debris of commercial sauce bottles and all synthetic flavorings." I progressed to the Time-Life Good Cook series and to Simple French Cooking, in which Richard Olney hoped against hope that "the roses of the Parisian bistro are strong enough to illustrate the famous industrial revolution for some time to come." I turned to Paula Wolfert to learn more about Mediterranean cooking and was dismayed that I couldn't "feel a delicious dish in this book... The food here is real food... real food of real people." "Today I rush to the unconscious to pick up Sawers with in private to teach me the Savory world of authentic cuisine."

Culinary Luddites demand more than just taste. Since the days when counterculture, it has also persisted itself as a moral and political crusade. Now in Boston, the Olmsted Preservation and Exchange Trust works to provide "a scientific basis for the preservation and revitalization of traditional diets." Meanwhile, Slow food, founded in 1989, to protest the opening of a McDonald's in Rome, is a self-described Green Peace for food; its manifesto begins, "We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life. Which corrupts our health, poisons the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods... Slow Food is now the only truly progressive answer." As one of its spokesmen was reported as saying in the New York Times, "Our real enemy is the obese consumer."

At this point I begin to backtrack. I want to try, "Enough!" But why? Who would, who learned to cook from Culinary Luddities, who grew up in a family that, in Elizabeth David's words, produced their "own home-grown cabbages, ham and sausages... churned their own butter, fed their chickens and geese, cherished their fruit trees, 'skinned and cleaned their own hams' (well, to be honest, not the geese and sausages), not rejoice at the growth of Culinary Luddism? Why would I want anyone who wants to be thought 'on about common sense'? Or admit to preferring unusual food for unusual people? Or to queuing inquiring cuisines?"

The answer is not far to seek; because I am an historian. As an historian I cannot accept the account of the past inspired by Culinary Luddism, a pole sharply divided between good and bad, between the sunny rural days of yore and the grey industrial present. My enthusiasm for Luddite kitchen wisdom does not carry over to their history, any more than my response to a strong political speech influences me to accept the orator as a scholar. The Luddists' table of disaster, a list from grace, sounds more of wishful thinking than of digging through archives. It gains credence not from scholarship but from evocative dichotomies: fresh and casual versus processed and preserved, local versus global; slow versus fast, artisanal and traditional versus urban and industrial, healthful versus consumed and fatty. History shows, I believe, that the Luddites have things back to front.

That food should be fresh and natural has become an article of faith. It comes as something of a shock to realize that this is a latter-day creed. For our ancestors, natural was something quite rare. Natural often tasted bad. Fresh meant stan and tough, fresh milk warm and unmistakably a boil exception; fresh fish did and grapes were being rare exceptions outside the tropics were inadequately star, fresh
vegetables latter. Even today, natural can be a shock when we actually encounter it. When Jacques Pepin offered free-range chickens to friends, they found “the flesh tough and the flavor too strong,” prompting him to wonder whether they would really like things the way they naturally used to be.

Natural was unreliable. Fresh fish began to stink, fresh milk soured, eggs went rotten. Everywhere seasons of plenty were followed by seasons of hunger when the days were short, the weather turned cold, and the rain did not fall. Hens stopped laying eggs, cows went dry, fruits and vegetables

Eating fresh, natural food was regarded with suspicion verging on horror, something to which only the uncivilized, the poor, and the starving resorted.

were not to be found, fish could not be caught in the streams, nuts could not be gathered. Grains, which supplied from 80 to 90 per cent of the caloric intake of most societies, were hard to harvest, grind, and cook to make them edible. Other plants, including the roots and tubers that were the life support of the societies that did not eat grains, were often downright poisonous. Without careful processing green potatoes, stringy taro, and cassava bitter with pyrubic acid are not just indigestible, but toxic.

Nor did our ancestors’ physiological theories dispose them to the natural. Until about two hundred years ago, from China to Europe, and in Mesoamerica, too, everyone believed that the fire in the belly cooked foodstuffs and turned them into nutrients. That was what digesting was. Cooking foods to effect pre-digested them and made them easier to assimilate. Given a choice, no one would burden the stomach with raw, unprocessed foods.
Local food was greeted with about as much enthusiasm as fresh and natural. Local foods were the lot of the poor who could neither escape the tyranny of local climate and biology nor the monotonous, often precarious, diet it afforded. Meanwhile, the rich, in search of a more varied diet, bought, sole, shellfish, mackerel, salmon, and ran off with appealing plants and animals, foods and culinary techniques from wherever they could find them.

The five centuries B.C., Celtic princes led the Romans, and their ships and armies invaded the Mediterranean, transforming the diets of West Asia and the shores of the Mediterranean. In the seventeenth century, the Japanese had domesticated the tea plant of China and were importing sugar from Southeast Asia. In the seventeenth century, the European rich drank sweetened coffee, tea, and cocoa in Chinese porcelain, imported or visitation, preferred by servants in Turkish or other foreign areas. To ensure their own supply, the French, English, and English embarked on imperial ventures and moved millions of Africans and Asians around the globe. The Swedish, who had no empire, had a third time getting these exotic foods, so the eighteenth-century botanists Linnaeus set about plans to naturalize the tea plant in Sweden.

We may laugh at the climatic helplessness of his proposal. Yet it was no more ridiculous than other, more successful, proposals to naturalize Southeast Asian sugar cane throughout the tropics, apie in Australia, grapes in Chile, Hereford cattle in Colorado, and Swedish wheat on the Canadian prairie. Without our aggressively global ancestors, we would all still be subject to the tyranny of the local.

At far slow food, it is easy to wax nostalgic about a time when families and siblings met to chop over delicious food and to forget that, far from being an invention of the last twentieth century, fast food has been a mainstay of every society. Hunters tracking their prey, fishermen at sea, shepherds tending their flocks, soldiers on campaign, and farmers nothing to get in the harvest all needed food that could be eaten quickly and away from home. The Greeks trusted

Imagined friends.
barley and ground it into a meal to eat straight or mixed with water, milk, or butter (as the Tibetans still do), while the Asters ground roasted maze and mixed it with water to make an instant beverage (as the Mexicans still do).13

City dwellers, above all, relied on fast food. When fuel cost as much as the food itself, when huddled dwellings lacked cooking facilities, and when cooking fires might easily conflagrate entire neighborhoods, it made sense to purchase your bread or noodles, and a little meat or fish to beef them up. Before the birth of Christ, Romans were picking up honey cakes and sausage in the forum.14 In twelfth-century Hang-hou, the Chinese dressed noodles, stuffed bins, bowls of soup, and deep-fried confections. In Baghdad of the same period, the townsmen bought rice, cooked meat, salt fish, bread, and a bowl of dried chick peas. In the sixteenth century, when the Spanish arrived in Mexico, Mexicans had been enjoying tamales from the market for generations. In the eighteenth century, the French purchased cocoa, apple preserves, and wine in the bushelards of Paris, while the Japanese savored tea, noodles, and stewed fish.

Deep-fried food, expensive and dangerous to prepare at home, have always had their place on the street doughnuts in Europe, crullers in Mexico, amadil in Okinawa, and sev in India. Bread, also expensive to bake at home, is one of the oldest convenient foods. For many people in West Asia and Europe, a loaf fresh from the baker was the only warm food of the day. To these venerable traditions of fast food, Americans have simply added the electric deep fryer, the loaf from griddle of the Low Countries, and the franchise.15 The McDonald's in Rome was, in fact, just one more in a long tradition of fast food joints reaching back to the days of the Caesars.

What about the idea that the best food was country food, homemade by artisans?16 This food came from the countryside without saying. The presumed corollary—that country people ate better than city dwellers—does not. Few who worked the land were independent peasants baking their own bread, brewing their own beer at home, and selling down their own pig. Most were bound with heavy taxes and rents paid in kind (that is, food), or worse, they were indentured servants, or slaves. Barely part of the cash economy, they subsisted on what was left over. "The city dwellers," remarked the great Roman doctor Galen in the second century A.D., "collected and stored enough grain for all the coming year immediately after the harvest. They carried off all the wheat, the barley, the beans and the lentils and left what remained to the country folk."17

What remained was pitiful. All too often, those who worked the land got by on thin gruel and grits flatbread.

North of the Alps, French peasants praved that chestnuts would be sufficient to sustain them from the time when their grain ran out to the harvest still three months away.18 South of the Alps, Italian peasants suffered skin eruptions, went mad, and in the worst cases died of pellagra brought on by a diet of maize polenta and water. The duties we call ethnic and assume to be of present origin were invented for the urban, or at least urban, aristocrats who collected the surplus. This is true of the lagasse of northern Italy or it is of the chicken arroz of Mughal Delhi, the mursi's pork of imperial China, the pilafs, stuffed vegetables, and haklava of the great Ottoman palace in Istanbul, or the mac n'teak of nineteenth-century Bangkok. Cities have always enjoyed the best food and have invariably been the focal points of culinary innovation.

Nor are most "traditional foods" very old. For every prized dish that goes back two thousand years, a dozen have been invented in the last two hundred.19 The French baguette? A twentieth-century phenomenon, adopted nation-wide only after World War II. English fish and chips? Dates from the late nineteenth century, when the working class took up the fried fish of Sephardic Jewish immigrants in East London. Fish and chips, though, will soon be a thing of the past. It's a Balinese lapa now, Balinese being a kind of split-fried cown dreamed up by Pakistanis living in Birmingham. Greek mousakas? Created in the early twentieth century in an attempt to render Greek fish. The bubbling Russian samovar? Late eighteenth century. The Indonesian nasi goreng? Dutch colonial food. Indonesian poikai food? Invented for the tourist market in the past fifty years. Teguita? Promoted as the national drink of Mexico during the 1960s by the Mexican film industry: Indian tandoori chicken? The brainchild of Hindu Punjabi who survived by selling chicken cooked in a Muslim-style tandoor even when they fled Pakistan for Delhi during the Partition of India. The soy sauce, steamed white rice, sushi, and tempura of Japan? Commonly eaten only after the middle of the nineteenth century. The lontoni salmon, salted salmon rubbed with chopped tomatoes and spring onions that is a fixture in every Hawaiian home? Not a salmon it is to be found within two thousand miles of this island, and onions and tomatoes were unknown in Hawaii until the nineteenth century. These are indisputable facts of history, though, if you point these out you will be met with stares of disbelief.

Not only were many "traditional foods" created after industrialization and urbanization, a lot of them were dependent on it. The Swedish smorgasbord came into its own at the beginning of the twentieth century when canned out-of-season fish, rice, and liver paste made it possible to set
over a lavish table, Hungarian goulash was unknown before the sixteenth century, and not widely accepted until after the invention of the punch bowl, drinking mugs in 1880. When lands were conquered, peoples migrated, populations converted to different religions or accepted new dietary theories, and cultures—ever with different cuisines—were forged and new ones invented. Where wine is the cuisine of Renaissance Spain and Italy, or of the Indian Raj, or of Tastee Buna, of testee Buna, of Mysore food in Singapore, Cape Malay food in South Africa, Creole food in the Mississippi Delta, and Local Food in Hawaii. How long does it take to create a cuisine? Not long: less than 60 years, judging by past experience. Were old foods more healthful than ours? Inherently in this vague notion are several different claims, among them that foods were less dangerous, that diets were better balanced. Yet while we fret about pesticides on apples, mercury in tuna, and mad cow disease, we should remember that ingesting food is, and always has been, inherently dangerous. Many plants contain both toxins and carcinogens, often at levels much higher than any pesticide residues. Grilling and frying add more. Some historians argue that bread made from rye, verminous flour, adulterated with earth, leaves, at least to make it go further, or contaminated with hemp or poppy seeds, grows out survivors, that is to say, how many Europeans perished in a dragged base subject to hallucinations. Certainly, some of our forebears went drunk much of the time, given that beer or wine were preferred to water, and with good reason. In the insect pollinated water supplies brought intestinal diseases in their wake. In France, for example, no piped water was available until the 1870s. Bread was likely to be stretched with chalk, pepper adulterated with the weeping of waterhouse; butter, and sausage stuffed with all the louse favorably espoused by Ugren, Sinclair in The Jungle, even the most reputable cookbooks recommended using concentrated sulfuric acid so intensify the color of lamp. Milk, suspected of spreading scarlet fever, typhoid, and diphtheria as well as tuberculous, was sensible avoided well into the twentieth century when the United States and many parts of Europe introduced stringent regulations. No mother left wool from the food bin; my aunt declared that if the mites could eat her house-crad lambs and survive, to feed the family. As to dietary balance, once again we have to distinguish between rich and poor. The rich, whose beautiful tables and ample gaths were visible evidence of their status in life, suffered most of the diseases of excess. In the seventeenth century, the Mogul Emperor, Aurangzeb, died of overindulgence in food, opium, and alcohol. In Georgian England, George Cheyne, the leading doctor, had to be hedged in and out of his cottage by his servants when he soared to four hundred pounds, while a little later, Emmis Darwin, grandfather of Charles and another important physician, had a semicircular cut out of his dining table to accommodate his paunch. In the nineteenth century, the fourteenth shogun of Japan died at age twenty-one, probably of beriberi induced by eating the white rice available only to the privileged. In the Islamic countries, India, and Egypt, the well-to-do took sugar as a medicine. In India they used butter; and in much of the world people avoided fresh vegetables, all on medical advice. Whether the peasants really starved, and if so how often, particularly outside of Europe, is the subject of ongoing research. What is clear is that the food supply was always precarious: if the weather was bad or war broke out, there might not be enough to go around. The end of winter or the dry season saw everyone suffering from the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, scarcity occurring on land as well as at sea. By our standards, the diet was rough for people who were engaged in heavy physical labor. Estimates suggest that in France on the eve of the Revolution one in three adult men got by on no more than 1,800 calories a day, while seven years later in Japan daily intake was perhaps 1,500 calories. Hanumans believe that in times of scarcity peasants essentially hibernated during the winter. It is not surprising, therefore, that in France the poorest of peasants was “there is always bread in the house,” while the Japanese advice advised that “all that matters is still to withstand.” To the random measures of health and nutrition—life expectancy and height—we ancestors were far worse off than we are. Much of the blame was due to the diet, exacerbated by living conditions and infections which affect the body’s ability to use the food that is ingested. No amount
of nostalgia for the pastoral foods of the distant past can

with awe the fact that our ancestors lived mean, short lives,

constantly afflicted with diseases, many of which can be

directly attributed to what they did and did not eat.

Historical myths, though, can mislead as much by what

they don't say as by what they do. Culinary Luddites typi-
cally gloss over the moral problems intrinsic to the labors of

producing and preparing food. In 1660, ninety-five percent of

the Russian population and eighty percent of the French

lived in the country; in other words, they spent their days

growing food on the table for themselves and other people.

A century later, eighty-eight percent of Russians, eighty-five

percent of Greeks, and over fifty percent of the French were

still on the land.12 Traditional societies were aristocratic,

trade up of the men who toiled to produce, process,

prepare, and preserve food, and the few who, supported by the

limited surplus, could do other things.

In the great kitchens of the Few—as royalty, aristocracy,

and rich merchants—cooks created elaborate cuisines. The

cuisines drove home the power of the mighty Few with a

symbol that everyone understood: orientations show of

these foods that the powerful could possess consume.

Feasts were public occasions for the display of power; not private

occasions for celebrations, for enjoying food for food's sake.

The poor were invited to watch, groveling as the rich gorged

themselves.13 Louis xiv was exploiting a tradition going back

to the Roman Empire when he encouraged spectacles at his

feasts. Sometimes, to hammer home the point while amus-

ing the court, the spectacles were let loose on the leftovers.

"The destruction of so horrid an arrangement served to

give any other agreeable entertainment to the court," obser-

ved a commentator, "by the alacrity and disorder of those

who desolateth these castles of man's kind, and these mountains

of preserved food."14

Meanwhile, most men were born to a life of labor in the

field, most women to a life of grinding, chopping, and

cooking. "Sensitude," said my mother as she prepared home-

cooked breakfast, dinner, and tea for eight to ten people three

hundred and ten-five days a year. She was right. Churning

butter and skimming and cleaning huts—without the option

of picking up the phone for a pizza if one suriving goes wrong,

is unrewarding, unfulfilling. Perhaps, though, my mother

did not realize how much worse her lot might have been.

She could at least two out bread from the baker. In Mexico,

at the same time, women without servants could expect to

spend five hours a day—once they had waking hours—

knelling at the grindstone preparing the dough for the

famih's tortillas. Not until the 1930s did the invention of the

tortilla machine release them from the drudgery.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it

looked as if the distinction between gentry and grovelers

would widen. Between 1755 and 1855 world population had

doubled from 500 million to a billion, and it was to double

again by 1950. Malnourishment sent its dietary deductions.

The poor, driven by necessity or governmental mandate, resorted

to basic foods that produced householdly even if they were

disliked: maize and sweet potatoes in China and Japan,

maize in Italy, Spain and Romans, potatoes in northern

Europe.17 They eked out an existence on porridges or pota-

toes, on oats or maize, on coarse breads of rye or barley bulled

out with flour or even clay and ground limestone, and on boiled

potatoes; they saw meat only on rare occasions.18 The priva-
tion continued. In Europe, 1840 was a year of hunger,

best remembered now as the time of the devastating potato

famine of Ireland. Meanwhile, the rich continued to

indulge, feasting on white bread, meats, rich fatty sauce,

sweet deserts, exotic housecat grown jowplings, wine, and

tea, coffee, and chocolate drunk from fine china. In 1845,

shortly after revolutions had rocked Europe, the British

Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli described "two nations,

between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy..." the

who were fed by a different breeding, are fed by a different

food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed

by the same laws...THE RICH AND THE POOR."19

In the nick of time, in the 1850s, the individualization of

food got under way. Long after the production of other com-

mon items of consumption such as textiles and clothing had

been mechanized, farmers brought new land into produc-

tion, utilized reapers and later tractors and combines, spread

more fertilizer, and by the 1930s began growing hybrid maize.

Steamships and trains brought fresh and canned meats,

fruits, vegetables, and milk to the growing towns. Instead of

starving, the poor of the industrialized world survived and

throve. In Britain the retail price of food in a typical work-

man's budget fell by a third between 1837 and 1888 (though

he could still spend twenty-one percent of his income on

food and drinks). In 1868 in the United States a dollar bought

forty-two percent more milk, fifty-one percent more coffee, a

third more beef, twice as much sugar, and twice as much

flour as in 1875.20 By the beginning of the twentieth century,

the British working-class were drinking sugary tea from china

glasses and eating white bread spread with jam and mar-

garine, canned meats, canned pineapple, and an orange

from the Christmas stocking.

To the cheap Ian, the margarine, and the starchy

diet look pathetic. Yet white bread did not cause the "weak-

ness, indigestion, or nausea" that came whole wheat bread

did when it supplied most of the calories but a problem for
us since we never consume it in such quantities.\[^{11}\] Besides, it was easier to detect stretch such as sawdust in white bread, margarine and jam made the bread more attractive and easier to swallow. Sugar tasted good, and hot tea in an unheated house in mid-winter provided good cheer. For those who fruit had been available, if at all, only from June to October, candied pineapple and a Christmas orange were treats to be relished. For the dinner, therefore, the meal would be a dream come true, a feast step away from a course, monotonous diet and the constant threat of hunger, even starvation.

Nor should we think it was only the English, not famed for their cuisine, who were delighted with industrialized foods. Everyone was, whether American, Asian, African, or European. In the first half of the twentieth century, Italians embraced factory-made pasta and canned tomatoes.\[^{11}\] In the second half of the century, Japanese women welcomed facten-made bread because they could sleep in a little longer instead of having to get up to make rice.\[^{11}\] Similarly, Mexicans stoted on bread as a good food to have on hand when there was no time to prepare tamales. Working women in India are happy to serve commercially-made bread during the week, saving the time-consuming business of making chapatis for the weekend. As supermarkets appeared in Eastern Europe and Russia, housewives rejoiced at the choice and convenience of ready-made goods. For all, Culinary Modernism had provided what was wanted: food that was processed, preservable, industrial, novel, and fast, and the food of the elite at a price everyone could afford. Where modern food became available, populations grew taller, stronger, had fewer diseases, and lived longer. Men had choices other than hard agricultural labor, women other than knowing at the where to hours a day.

So the spirit past of the Culinary Modernists never existed. So their ethos is based not on history but on a fairy tale. So what? Perhaps we now need this culinary philosophy. Certainly no one would deny that an industrialized food supply has its own problems, problems we have not about every day. Perhaps we should eat more fresh, natural, local, artisanal, slow food. Why we create a historical myth to further that end? The past is over and gone. Does it matter if the Pharaoh of the history of the right things?

It matters quite a bit, I believe. If we do not understand that most people had no choice but to devote their lives to growing and cooking food, we are incapable of comprehending that the foods of Culinary Modernism— egitarian, available more or less equally to all, without demanding the disproportionate amount of the resources of time we money that traditional foodstuffs did—allow us unparalleled choices not just of diet but of what to do with our lives. If we urge the Mexican to stay at her nature, the farmer to stay at his olive press, the housewife to stay at her stove instead of going to McDonald's, so that we may eat handmade tamales, traditionally pressed olive oil, and homemade paella, we are assuming the mantle of the aristocrats of old. We are reducing the options of others as we attempt to impose our elite culinary preferences on the rest of the population.

If we fail to understand how scarce and opportunistic most traditional diets were, we can misunderstand the "ethnic foods" we encounter in cookbooks, restaurants, or our travels. We let our eyes glide over the occasional references to servants, to travel and education abroad in localized ethnic cookbooks, references that otherwise would clue us in to the fact that the recipes are those of monied Indians, Italians, or Chinese with maids to do the drudgery work of preparing elaborate dishes. We may mistake the needs of today's Europeans, Asians, or Mexican middle class (many of them benefiting from industrialization and contemporary tourism) for peasant food or for the daily fare of our ancestors. We can represent the peoples of the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, India, or Mexico in pants at the mercy of multinational corporations bent on selling ready made products—allowing us to appreciate that, like us, they enjoy a choice of goods in the market, foreign restaurants to eat at, and new recipes to try. A Mexican friend, suffering from one too many foreign visions who chided her because she offered Italian, not Mexican food, complained, "Why can't we eat spaghetti, too?"

If we unthinkingly assume that good food maps neatly onto old or slow or homemade food even though we all have basic burnt cooking, we miss the fact that lots of industrial foodstuffs are better. Certainly no one with a gridded stove will ever produce chocolate as snazzy as that produced by cooking in a machine for twenty hours. Nor is the housewife likely to turn out fine soy sauce or miso. And let us not forget that the current popularity of Italian food owes much to the availability and long shelf life of two convenience foods that even purists love, high-quality factory past and canned tomatoes. Far from fearing them, we should be clamoring for more high-quality industrial foods.

If we romanticize the past, we may miss the fact that it is the modern, global, industrial economy (not the local resources of the wine country around New York Boston, or Chicago) that allows us to eat traditional, peasant, fresh, and natural foods. Virgin olive oil. Thai fish sauce, and重点 noodles come to us thanks to international marketing. Fresh and natural local so large because we can take for granted the preserved and processed staples with flour, sugar,