World History and Family Dinner: On Rachel Laudan’s Cuisine and Empire

By Lydia Kiesling [1] posted at 6:00 am on January 24, 2014

1.
Of all the methods by which I poisoned myself in college, my frequent trips to McDonald’s have assumed outsize shame in my adult conscience. Forget the cases of Utica Club, the double cranberry vodkas from the Village Tavern, the array of other substances with which I dulled my wits — in my embarrassed memory it is the Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese that bulked up my ass, muddled my judgment, and transformed me from the sylph-like high-schooler with good accessories and great skin, to a pallid, voracious, bleary-eyed monster. As years pass, my McDonald’s-going former self assumes increasingly monstrous proportions in my recollection — as Michael Pollan becomes ubiquitous in New York Times-reading households, books like Salt Sugar Fat [2] hit the Terry Gross circuit, and news stories beam the equally ubiquitous “headless fatty” imagery into our living rooms. The specter of nine-year-olds so rotund they can barely fit into their schoolrooms has Michelle Obama doing arm-lifts with squads of youngsters. Today, I live down the street from a McDonald’s, but would no more eat there than I would take a crap in the aisle of the caddy-corner Whole Foods, where I buy even my cat food, where I scrupulously avoid the middle parts of the store unless it’s to get a box of organic pasta, or, if someone is coming over, water crackers upon which to spread my soft, fatty cheeses.

Imagine my shock, in this twin state of privilege and indoctrination, when a new book by a food historian invites me to imagine “burger joints more brightly lit than any monarch’s dining room,” places where “ordinary people...could feast on grilled beef on fluffy white bread, accented by a creamy sauce and fresh lettuce and tomato, with perfect French fries on the side. With the meal...a tall, icy drink, perhaps a shake of milk and ice cream or perhaps a sparkling cola.” As if that were a good thing. With no attendant come-down, no pronouncement
about our path to dietary and moral ruin, this tableau, argues Rachel Laudan in her wonderful new book *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History*, represents in many ways the pinnacle of collective human ingenuity — the work of millennia during which cooks from royal kitchens to the hearths of the nameless masses figured out how to feed themselves and other people. McDonald’s and places like it represent, she says, “a welcome end to millennia of inequality forcibly expressed by culinary distinctions.”

Laudan’s scope, which is the entirety of food production in human history, may seem ludicrous, but her work is in the tradition of world history currently enjoying a kind of vogue. As Laudan told Elatia Harris in an interview, world historians have been “drawing on decades of detailed historical scholarship to see if they could trace big patterns of disease, warfare, enslavement, ecological change, and religious conversion. Why shouldn’t I jump into the fray and see if there were big patterns to be traced in food?” Her book thoroughly outlines these patterns, identifying a few major cuisines, what she calls “ordered styles of cooking,” that have played the greatest role in shaping human culinary styles and methods: the “Barley-Wheat Sacrificial Cuisines” of ancient empires located in and around the modern Middle East; the Buddhist Cuisines cohering in the third century B.C.E.; the transformative force of Islam, aided by Mongols; and then Christianity, which Laudan identifies as the major unifying force within European cuisine and then that of the Americas — first with the early Christian and Byzantine, then the Catholic cuisines of the Habsburg and Bourbon reigns, and finally in Protestant, republican cuisines. As she traces these currents, Laudan points out the way that engagement between these overlapping world realms created hybrids and permutations, with paella and pilau sharing the same family tree. As colonial empires expanded, the food of the colonized and enslaved was stamped with a colonial flavor, and vice versa.

Throughout history, class dictated the flavor and variety of one’s food, how much fat and sweet one got, and so forth. Cuisines were divided into the vastly different high and humble, and available to the elite and the non-elite accordingly. Modern cuisines are what Laudan calls “middling cuisines,” tasty food born of a confluence of a political ethos dissatisfied with centuries of monarchy, a mode of Christian religious thought the highest expression of which was the family meal, and a hitherto unimaginable access to food in quantity and variety. Modern, middling cuisines spread throughout the world with new ways
to process wheat, meat, milk, fruit, and vegetables. In industrialized nations in the 20th century, non-elite cooks became able “to turn out a variety of different meals from different culinary traditions, instead of the nineteenth-century pattern of a weekly sequence of meals, or the yet-earlier pattern of a series of minor variations on pottage.”

_Cuisine and Empire_ is complex and highly academic, but Laudan is a good writer and her owlish wit pops up just when your eyes are beginning to glaze at the varieties of millet (there are a lot of millets). There is nothing argumentative or prescriptive about her book — it is hard to argue with her assertion that “the problems of the diseases of plenty...are surely less appalling than the diseases of poverty.” But in our current American historical moment it seems breathtakingly transgressive, airing views I have hitherto encountered only on Size Acceptance blogs (which typically avoid defaming specific foods). Some of Laudan’s findings carry an implicit rejection of things that many of us have lately come to believe — that McDonald’s is the death knell of civilization, for one. She also neatly demonstrates the process by which certain ideas become dogma, and how our ideas about food change with our understanding of science, nutrition, religion, and the state at any given moment. _Rousseau_, as it happens, was one of the early adopters of the Slow Food Movement, believing “that what was natural was as little altered as possible, not an essence achieved by lengthy processing and cooking: Simply boiled vegetables, fresh fruit, and milk...were natural.” In fact, most interventions in food production have been met with backlash on scientific or moral grounds. Rousseau’s vegetables, milk, and fruit were themselves anathema to millennia of culinary philosophies, which held that food was not really food until it was cooked, and spiced, and had undergone a religio-scientific change that varied depending on one’s particular religious cosmology and ideas about nutrition.

2. Reading history typically does two paradoxical things: it tunes you in to the unique, specific fuckery and magic of your own moment, while simultaneously proving the old adage, “Same shit, different day.” Our peculiar historical moment is one in which Michael Pollan and his cohort have hardened hearts against the fast food hamburger, while the fast food hamburger remains the most available thing to eat in large tracts of the country. Children are told to eat their fruits and vegetables, and presented with lackluster pink wedges. Great swaths of Americans are hungry, while the non-hungry Instagram sumptuous
meals. A recent *New Yorker* described an establishment with $15 to $27 entrees as "the ultimate neighborhood restaurant, the type of place where the food hits the sweet spot of being good (not to mention affordable)..." Food gentrification, Mikki Kendall wrote recently [5], puts "traditional meals out of reach for those who created the recipes." Books like *Wheat Belly* [6] and proponents of the so-called Paleo diet are slowly vilifying grain. (Laudan's book does not mention this trend, but nothing could appear more farcical set against the backdrop of her scholarship, which tells us, basically, that grain is civilization. Liberty, even.)

Reading a book like *Cuisine and Empire* enriches the process by which you understand the world, both as you consider the grand sweep of history and assess your own troubled emotions regarding Hormel canned chili. All people are located within a dense web of spatial, financial, and cultural skeins that will dictate what they eat and how they prepare it. I found, reading Laudan, that even art was affected. Concurrent with *Cuisine and Empire*, I happened to read Anita Brookner's perfect novel *The Debut* [7], and I was amazed by how much new information Laudan had equipped me to suss. The 1950s British heroine wishes to woo a man with chicken casserole; her parents' louche middle class housekeeper advises her to bake the chicken in Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup, but she opts instead for the fancy version from *Larousse Gastronomique* [8], with expensive leeks purchased from Harrods. Her father brings home a half-pound of tongue and a tin of artichoke hearts, after having a "cup of tea, heavily sugared, and served in broad shallow cups."

I'll take almost any opportunity to think about myself, but it seems important to think about one's relationship with food, and it is soothing, while reading *Cuisine and Empire*, to do so against such a vast backdrop. I am a big eater, a "known pig," as my husband put it recently when he came upon me circling the unattended Christmas turkey while others set the table. (I love the soft, dark, fatty parts of a bird's undercarriage, but at every turkey feast I attend, the knife-wielding patriarch insists on carving a platter of bland, uniformly sliced white meat. I find myself angling for a quiet moment with the carcass, filching discarded pieces of skin from the sink, pulling a perfectly good neck out of the trash.) A known pig, but over the course of my 20s I have been successfully indoctrinated against certain kinds of fast food and most grocery items that come in packages, which leads to confused, contradictory, and offensive
positions on things. I won’t eat a Keebler Snack Cake, but I will eat an entire salami. I spurn the Olive Garden, but regularly eat a calorie-laden burrito filled with God knows what. I see fellow bus-riders with translucent McDonald’s bags to be fed to young children and feel sad, disregarding my past encounters with the Quarter Pounder and the Whopper.

Reading Laudan’s book also happened to correspond with the anniversary of probably the most special thing in my personal food universe. Seven years ago, I moved to San Francisco and struck up a friendship with three boys who lived down the street, friends of friends I had met on a past visit to the city. On a whim one afternoon, trying to woo someone probably, I decided to make us all food. I got a bunch of chicken legs and thighs. I found a recipe on the Internet and marinated the chicken in yogurt with lime zest. I still remember how beautiful it smelled; my disappointment, when the chicken turned to charred lumps on the baking sheet, was considerable — the lime hardly perceptible on the blackened skin. Like all of the really important things that have happened in my life, this was such a non-momentous occasion, such an accident, that I routinely thank divine providence for the instincts of my friends and my unperceiving 22-year-old self. (Around the time I made the chicken, but not because of it, I struck up a romance with one of the boys. Within six months we were installed together in windowless apartment in Chinatown, and now we are married.)

On a Wednesday night shortly after the chicken incident, one of the boys decided to try something fancy — fish in parchment paper — and invited us all to eat it. Days later, a friend who lived in Oakland got accidentally drunk in San Francisco and stayed over for dinner; she and her husband showed up together the next Wednesday. The following week, their bandmate and her boyfriend came to what we began calling “Family Dinner.” Depending on a variety of factors — how many people were coming, how much cash people had at the time — the meal was either ambitious, or a staple from our childhood. I made a mis-spiced version of my mother’s spaghetti with clam sauce; my now-husband made Brunswick stew and strawberry salad. One of the boys made his Aunt Hazel’s meatloaf.

In her interview, Rachel Laudan told Elatia Harris that “the concept of family dinner, much lauded now the world over, is relatively new. The importance of the family meal as the foundation of society and the state is so deeply ingrained
in the American tradition that it’s hard to appreciate just how American it is.” As young and extremely carefree 20-somethings who spent their weeknights drinking $5 pitchers of Busch at the now-defunct Jack’s Club, we conceived of Family Dinner as a pseudo-ironic mimicry of the middle class practice with which we had all grown up. But seven years later, we are still at it. The group has grown from four people to 16. We have a calendar and a Google group, and we get together around 49 Wednesdays out of the year, rotating between approximately seven dwellings. One person cooks, everyone else brings beer or sometimes wine. We even have a family name: We’re the Boehners, and we love each other.

We have had six weddings, one divorce, and four babies, with another one on the way. The kids go side by side in the host’s darkened bedroom, like a row of little pod people. (Our single bedroom also houses the sole bathroom, so when it’s our week we take the litter box out of the laundry room and put the babies there.) Sometimes our relation to one another seems more familial than friendly. There are moments when we think that all or some of us are kind of a pain in the ass. There has even been a feud. But we have gone from pals who like beer and got a kick out of kitschy weekly dinners, to friends who feed pets or mind one another’s children. People move away and many of them come back; my husband and I moved out of state for three years and returned, partially, I think, because Family Dinner had become the defining feature of our collective social lives, the anchor of our weeks.

Rachel Laudan told Harris, “Every time you go into the kitchen, you take your culture with you. As you plan a meal for guests, say, you bring to it assumptions about how to mesh their preferences with yours, about how much it is appropriate to spend on the meal, about how to accommodate their religious or ethical food rules, and about what they believe to be healthy and delicious.” The Boehners are all American. We are all members of what Laudan would call the “salaried middle class,” although technically some of us earn an hourly wage. We have all wandered away from some kind of faith tradition (Catholicism, Judaism, Mormonism, a variety of Protestantisms). Every one of us has been to college or beyond. We are all white.

As an eater, I embody my father — a self-described human garbage disposal, who wrote a letter to his parents from college telling them, “my whole life changed when I learned to eat raw onion.” But my mother is the source of my
feelings about cooking. From her, I inherited the desire to be hospitable, without the finesse of her results. Her kitchen is always equipped with the makings for a nice salad. She sets the table beautifully. Entertaining figured large in her life because she was married to a diplomat; she tells a story about hosting a group of Moroccans and serving a gazpacho that not a single person touched for reasons that remain obscure. She is an elegant hostess, but she is hard on herself. And when it’s my turn for Family Dinner and I have a roomful of friends to feed, even these Boehners whom I love, who have seen me cry and fish turkey necks out of the trash, some panicked female spirit inhabits my body, makes break out in sweat over the stove, and snap at my husband.

My friends have Smitten Kitchen; my mother had The Silver Palate [9], The Joy of Cooking [10], and then those cookbooks that Rachel Laudan describes as being written “by highly educated middle- or upper-class women” to interpret foreign cuisines for American and British readers. Marcella Hazan’s “peasant hash” was a staple of our household. I continue the legacy with Claudia Roden’s seminal book The New Book of Middle Eastern Food [11], and despite the fact that only around four of the many, many recipes that I have followed to the letter have really turned out, I continue to select them for their wholesome “authenticity.” (Like an Anita Brookner heroine, I instinctively feel that nothing from my own food background can compare to “real” food cultures, where they put spoonfuls of mastic into ice water, or eat bergamot preserves.) I now believe that Roden’s recipes are actually terrible, or rather, the kind of recipes written for people who already know what they are doing and can thus interpret the shorthand of a veteran cook. But it’s not Claudia Roden’s fault that I make bizarre choices. Recently for one of my Family Dinners I found a dish of fried eggs and chicken livers in her book. Perfect, I thought. Wholesome, economical, and somehow chic. But my pan wasn’t hot enough, or something, and my eggs dispersed upon contact with my livers, and I ended up with a lumpy lukewarm mud that was unmistakably liver-based in an unpleasing way. We ran out of ketchup to mask the horror, and my accompanying “Tunisian soup” was just hot fish water. Only one Family Dinner has been worse (and really only its smell), when a gentleman Boehner made something called burgoo — a dish once enjoyed, says Laudan, by seamen in the British Navy — and filled his shared apartment with the odor of garbage.

Laudan writes that “national cuisines, like nations themselves, have been
created in the last two hundred years," "often in the last fifty or sixty," and often in response to trends from elsewhere. And we've been through them. We've had "Italian" spaghetti ("a popular Sunday dish in Britain") and lasagna ("staple of the American table"). Moussaka, a Greek classic to which Laudan writes that béchamel was added in an effort to be Frenchy in the early 20th century. One of the Family Dinner superstars, who every year cooks a non-Kosher, utterly fantastic Passover Seder for 15 people, once made Japanese ramen, "the instant industrial version of which," Laudan tells us was, invented after World War II. One of the best Family Dinners I can remember was put on by two of our artistic members, who did "Big Macs," everything but the buns from scratch. The result was a beautiful, enormous, spectacularly tasty burger that looked the way the Big Mac does in the advertisements, the "grilled beef on fluffy white bread, accented by a creamy sauce and fresh lettuce and tomato" of Laudan's description, the pinnacle of food access and middling cuisines. (None of us are vegetarians, and I don't think it's totally a coincidence that the one truly abstemious eater among us, who is gluten-avoidant and favors an ayurvedic view of nutrition, often doesn't come.)

When one of our Boehner number was laid off and unemployed for a year, he kept up his rotation but, feeling we needed a reset from increasingly elaborate multi-course meals, heated up packaged tater tots and chicken nuggets and called it "Dad's family dinner." Early in the life of Family Dinner, if no one was equipped to cook, we got a bucket of Popeye's, a practice which is still known as "Dysfunctional Family Dinner," although now that we have grown in disposable income and fast food squeamishness, we usually get something else. It amazes me how easily that cruel moniker of "dysfunctional" came to us. Even without Laudan to tell us, we obviously share a core belief, presumably imparted by our parents and imbued with a fantastic amount of class privilege, that dinner, cooked by someone and eaten around the table together, is civilized practice, and that a deviation from this practice represents a personal or societal failure. My mother, most of our group's respective mothers, had a hot a meal on the table many nights of my life. On the very few occasions when she sent my father and me to Burger King, we were encouraged to smuggle the Whoppers back inside of the house so that the neighbors wouldn't see.

In Laudan's conception, our middle class, middling cuisines come from a sea change in human history, and demonstrate her assertion that "nothing shows your independence more than being able to choose what you eat." And in the
Boehners, all of whom have had plenty to eat our whole lives, I see those qualities that Laudan ascribes to the early-modern Protestant cuisine that has most colored the American food experience: a rejection of asceticism, a belief in the family at table, a taste for "middling" foods. As Laudan puts it, "for the richer part of the world today, dining on high or humble cuisines is not a matter of class determined by one's birth, but a matter of choice." She is thinking of long vanished imperial hierarchies, but, obviously, class still affects our food choices in significant ways. The foods that it is our privilege to scorn, enjoy, or mimic according to our mood, are often the foods most available to poor Americans, who are then shamed for eating them rather than the Rousseauian vegetables and milk. There is a mind-boggling grocery store across from my local McDonald's; this is not the case in many neighborhoods.

On a personal level, Laudan herself can afford her long view of food history: as she told Harris, "I've never acquired a taste for fast-food hamburgers or soft drinks, have never eaten Wonder Bread or its siblings, and cook at home six nights out of seven." Just as it is easy to call food poison when you don't have to eat it, it's arguably easy to call poison food in the same circumstances. But what I appreciate about Laudan is her sense of perspective. She urges us not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, and asks us to remember the centuries in which everyone but the highest elite ate "minor variations on pottage" achieved by backbreaking work (typically performed by women) that is still the norm in many parts of the world. In this context, a caloric and inexpensive meal of soft bread and meat is a revelation. At the rousing finish to her book, she tells us:

> The challenge is to acknowledge that not all is right with modern cuisines without romanticizing earlier ones; to recognize that contemporary cuisines have problems with health and equity without jumping to the conclusion that this is new; to face up to new nutritional challenges of abundance without being paternalist or authoritarian; to extend the benefits of industrialized food processing to all those who still labor with pestles and mortars; and to realize that the problem of feeding the world is a matter not simply of providing enough calories but of extending to everyone the choice, the responsibility, the dignity, and the pleasure of a middling cuisine.

After reading *Cuisine and Empire*, I read *The Last Banquet* [12] by Jonathan Grimwood, a novel about an Enlightenment-era French nobleman who concocts outlandish recipes in the years before the Revolution. Closing out his
journal and recipe book before the mob arrives to slaughter him, the narrator writes: “the rest is history or will be for those who come to write it after us. I doubt they will be kind, and why would they? They will see our sins and forget our graces.” The longer Family Dinner goes on, the more real its 1950s nostalgia becomes (recently one of its members suggested that we all learn how to play bridge). It has become the churchgoing or the Shabbat dinner that gave order to our grandparents’ weeks. In Laudan’s probing but gentle gaze, we are just modern people, enjoying our middling cuisines on our own terms. Narrow your scope, and, like a family in a Formica add, we are the exemplars and beneficiaries of myriad injustices in American life: malign food politics, systemic racism, unequal distribution of wealth. Even with our small apartments and dingy towels, we are the lucky ones.

But there are graces to record. The way new parents relax into themselves while their babies sleep in the next room. The way a kitchen grows warm with laughter and the heat of the stove. The way food has made a fake family real. Like the Sufi poet said: “On the surface of the stew we are dollops of rich grease / And we befriend the yogurt-meatball soup.”