

Histoire de la Cuisine et des Cuisiniers.*

Jean Pierre Poulain et Edmond Neirinck



This book is the 5th edition of the work published in 1988, which received the Award of the Académie Nationale de Cuisine the same year. This new edition, enriched and entirely rethought, is aimed at both professionals in the field of cuisine and a general public amateur of gastronomy. It is prefaced by the French chef Joel Robuchon.

The major characteristic of the work is the complementary approach by authors who combine disciplines: J.P. Poulain is an anthropo-sociologist,

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professor in the sociology department and director of the Centre d'Etude du Tourisme et des Industries de l'Accueil at the university of Toulouse le Mirail. Edmond Neirinck has led a career as a professor of cuisine and professional training for teachers in hotel management schools; he is a member of the Académie Culinaire as well as of several juries for cuisine competitions.

It is well known that human beings feed not only on foods but also on symbols and myths: this is why culinary practices and table manners are so rich to study human cultures. The book offers a precise initiation in the history of French gastronomy, exploring the evolutions of culinary styles and service rules which have been in use among the aristocracy, thus influencing durably world gastronomy. While the authors develop the biography of famous chefs and authors of recipe books, they also explore the role of critics, gastronomes and writers who acted as codifiers of food manners and tastes. The major interest of the book lies in the way each event is linked to the socio cultural history of the country, for behind practices stand imaginary, symbolic or mythic aspects which give meaning to people's choices and actions.

Opening with the beginnings of prehistoric cooking and early food transformation techniques, the book then shows how food and drink were codified in Ancient Greek and Roman times, which influenced later European modes. The publication of the 1st culinary book in the XIVth century marks the beginning of the history of gastronomy. The Renaissance, with overseas explorations as well as the rise of scientific approach, saw the introduction of new ingredients on European tables. Through the questioning of the development of Grande Cuisine, the authors explain the emergence of civility by the transformation of society in social classes with manners and prescriptions. For example, the use of spices as power markers is well demonstrated. The transformation of tastes and preferences into extreme refinement accompanied the subsequent evolution towards individualisation, leading to new precautions regarding animal sacrifice and the elaboration of techniques and tools. Refinement also meant the sophistication of culinary preparations such as sauces, stocks, roux, reduction, gravies, mousse. In the XVIIIth century context of reason, science and experimentation, several chefs considered Cuisine not only as an art but as alchemy. Correspondences were sought between food and

health: good food producing better human beings; the same rules applying to social status and even the political status of France.

Along with the French Revolution, the development of catering and restaurants is related to the change in society: bourgeoisie over aristocracy, the latter remaining the reference. Such a change called for the transformation of service modes and was accompanied by the development of cooking (coal then gas stoves) and preservation techniques (appertisation, refrigeration...). High society appetite for luxury hotels in fashionable European resorts resulted in the rise of the catering industry. XXth century tourism created new demands, to which the blooming of guides as well as gastronomic literature and criticism answered, ensuring French influence on the international level.

The book also studies the way innovation functions and explains the workings of Nouvelle cuisine and current trends, including the position of well known French chefs today, while discussing the reasons why French cuisine is not in the world limelight anymore – there it can be observed that the authors take an ethnocentric position concerning current political world events. They conclude with a dense chapter of sociological considerations on current food modernity, food industry and the difficulty for eaters to adopt new references.

This easy reading book, displaying a rich iconography, presents the reader with a very interesting approach, mobilizing pluridisciplinary scientific knowledge, of both the history and current debates in gastronomy. It is a useful pedagogic working tool.

Book Review by Isabelle Téchoueyres