All Manners of Food

Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present

STEPHEN MENNELL

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The Civilising of Appetite

'A full gut supports moral precepts' (Burmese proverb)
'A hungry stomach has no ears' (La Fontaine, Fables)
'All's good in a famine' (Thomas Fuller, Gnomologia, 1732)
'There is no banquet but someone dislikes something in it' (Ibid.)
'There's no sauce in the world like hunger' (Cervantes, Don Quixote)

Hunger, appetite, taste: rough-hewn insights into the tangled connections between the three are to be found, as insights so often are, in proverbs and literature. When people are sure of enough to eat, 'taste' is important. Taste, in food as in other domains of culture, implies discrimination, standards of good and bad, the acceptance of some things and the rejection of others. Good cooking revives the jaded appetite. When food is short, people are less selective. Hunger is one of the most powerful of all drives. How have people coped with it, and how has the patterning of appetite changed in response to changing supply and social distribution of nourishment? This chapter is concerned less with changes in qualitative tastes in food – later chapters deal with those – than with the more difficult question of changes over time in the regulation of appetite in the quantitative sense. In particular, it explores the question of whether the same long-term changes in the structure of societies which Norbert Elias argues in The Civilising Process (1939) brought about changes in manners, in the expression of the emotions, and in personality structure were also reflected in the patterning and expression of so basic a drive as appetite.

HUNGER AND APPETITE

Appetite, it must be remembered, is not the same thing as hunger. Nor is it the same thing as eating. Hunger is a body drive which recurs in all human beings in a reasonably regular cycle. Appetite for food, on the other hand, in the words of Daniel Cappon, a psychotherapist specialising in eating disorders, is:

basically a state of mind, an inner mental awareness of desire that is the setting for hunger. . . . An individual's appetite is his desire and inclination to eat, his interest in consuming food. Eating is what a person does. Appetite is what he feels like doing, mostly a psychological state. (1973: 21)

We tend to think of hunger, appetite and eating as directly linked in a simple chain of causality. That, as Herbert Blumer has pointed out, is a marked mistrepresentation of what takes place. It omits the internal processes through which a person constructs his act:

First, a person has to note his own hunger. If he didn't point it out to himself, he would be merely uncomfortable and restless and would not organise himself to search for food. Then he has to define his hunger in terms of whether it is something he should take care of. A glance at his watch may indicate that it is a half-hour before eating time and so he may decide to do nothing about it for that half hour. Or, he may remind himself that he is on a diet and say to himself, 'too bad, you will just have to skip a meal', and thus not act at all on the basis of hunger. Or he may decide he will eat. If so, he has to engage further in constructing his act. Through the use of images he points out to himself various possibilities of action – the selection of different kinds of food, different sources of food, and different ways of getting the food. In parading different objects before his mind's eye, he may fashion an intention of having a very delectable meal. Then he may recall or point out to himself the depleted state of cash in his pocket and, accordingly, map out another line of action. He may take into consideration the weather, the inconvenience of going out of doors, the food in the refrigerator, or the reading he wants to do. (1955: 95)

Blumer is right to point out how much may supervene between hunger and eating, but he makes it sound very coolly cerebral: his actor is very self-controlled. One would hardly guess how compelling a force appetite can be.

The link between hunger and appetite is provided by what is sometimes referred to as the 'appetit', by which is meant a psychological, not simply physiological, control mechanism regulating food intake. Just as a thermostat can be set too high or too low, so a person's 'appetit' can be set too high or too low in relation to the physiological optimum range. Too high a setting, too much food intake, is a condition of bulimia and excessive body weight; too low a setting represents the condition of anorexia and underweight.

A person's 'appetit' setting is determined not only by the underlying hunger drive, but also by often rather complex psychological processes in which social pressures can play a considerable part. Body image is a particularly notable element: how a person perceives his or her own body and its relation to what he or she perceives to be the socially approved body size and shape. Today psychologists understand more about the psychological problems which can lead individual people to have pathological 'eating disorders' and body weights deviating from what is healthy.

But what about the regulation of appetite in the 'normal' majority? Can that be studied in a long-term developmental perspective according to the model provided by Elias in The Civilising Process? Cappon provides a clue
that perhaps it can, when he argues that his patients with eating disorders are in some sense ‘immature’ personalities, and that the normal mature individual today is able to change his eating habits at will — when he eats, how long he lingers over a meal, what he eats, and the amount’ (1973: 45). In other words, Cappon is arguing that normal eating behaviour involves a capacity for considerable self-control. Has this capacity developed over the long term in European society in the same way that Elias argues other facets of self-control have done?

THE APPETITE OF GARGANTUA

The celebrated banquets of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, known to us from literary sources like Rabelais and from numerous documents throughout Europe, give a misleading image of typical eating in that period. Not only did they involve just a small minority of society — even if we allow that servants and retainers received their share — but from the spectacular bills of fare it is difficult to work out how much each individual actually ate. For example, the menu for a feast given by the City of Paris for Cathérine de’Medici in 1549 (Franklin, 1887–1902: VI, 93) lists 24 sorts of animals (mainly birds and other game, because butcher’s meat was then disdained for such grand occasions), many kinds of cakes and pastry, and a mere four vegetable dishes — but we do not know how many shared the food. At the feast for the enthronement of Archbishop Nevill at York in 1465, 1000 sheep, 2000 pigs, 2000 geese, 4000 rabbits, fish and game by the hundred, numerous kinds of bird, and 12 porpoises and seals were eaten (Warner, 1791: 95ff); but though we know the order of courses and even the seating plan for the most important guests, it is uncertain how many others took part, or indeed how long the feast lasted — it may have been several days. There is little doubt that guests could if they wished eat as much as they could take. The number of dishes set before the diners on such great occasions was very large — for example, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (c. 1400: 25) mentions 12 dishes between each pair of diners — but they did not necessarily finish them, for it is known that surplus from the high table mentally found its way to lower tables and eventually to the poor. Whatever the uncertainties, however, there seems little doubt that prodigious feats of appetite were witnessed on these occasions.

Yet the well-chronicled feasts are symptomatic of the period only in that there was often little to chronicle below this level, and the great mass of the people were lucky to be eating much at all; those who had the power to do so sometimes indulged in such banquets in times of widespread dearth. But the great feasts were also untypical in a more important sense: they were high points of an oscillating dietary regime even for the courtiers and nobility. Even they did not eat like that all the time. Perhaps, unlike most people, they rarely went hungry, but they did not always enjoy the wide choice which (rather than the sophistication of the cooking) was the hallmark of the feast. The rhythm of the seasons and the hazards of the harvest impinged even on their diet; even they knew periods of frugality. Breakfasts even in a royal household ‘would not now be regarded as extravagant in a day labourer’s family’, and on ordinary days dinners consisted of no more than two joints of meat, roast or boiled, or fish (Mead, 1931: 14–15). Robert Mandrou recognised the significance of these fluctuations in the pattern of eating:

without any doubt it was normal for all social classes to alternate between frugality and feasting. A consequence of the general insecurity where food was concerned, this oscillation imposed itself as a rite, some signs of which can still be found today. The festivals of the fraternities in the towns and those of the harvest, vintage or St Martin’s Day in the country were always occasions for fine living for a few hours at least — and with innumerable variations in the form it took, of course. But these huge feasts, after which a man had to live on bread and water for months on end provided compensation, however meagre, for ill-fortune, and were appreciated for that reason; the very precariousness of existence explained them. The virtue of thrift, of making one’s resources spread evenly over a given period, cannot be conceived of without a certain margin of supply. One other factor to be taken into account in explaining these ‘orgies’ is the ever-present dangers threatening the granary, what was the good of laying up large stocks if brigands or soldiers might come along the next day and carry them off? (Mandrou, 1961: 24)

This oscillation between fasting and feasting runs parallel to the extreme emotional volatility of medieval people noted by Elias, their ability to express emotion with greater freedom than today, and to fluctuate quickly between extremes. And their sources are the same.

Mandrou, like Elias, Bloch and Huizinga before him, 4 notes this general psychological volatility but, curiously, relates it only indirectly to the insecurity of life in medieval and early modern Europe; he attributes it in large part to the physiological effects of inadequate and irregular feeding: ‘The effect of this chronic malnutrition was to produce in man the mentality of the hunted, with its superstitions, its sudden outbursts of anger and its hypersensitivity’ (Mandrou, 1961: 26). Such direct physiological effects of nutrition on psychology should perhaps not be entirely discounted, but they should equally not be overstressed; the suggestion merely adds one more complication to an already complex causal nexus. More important — as Mandrou himself seemed to see clearly when specifically discussing the fluctuation between feasting and fasting — is the link between the general precariousness and unpredictability of existence and its reflection in personality, beliefs and social behaviour. Keith Thomas (1971) has emphasised the connection between the hazards of life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the prevalence of superstition and magical beliefs, which declined noticeably with the growing security of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it is Norbert Elias who has traced most fully the
Famines and Other Hazards

Life in medieval and early modern Europe certainly was by today's standards very insecure. As late as the third quarter of the seventeenth century in England, the life expectancy of males at birth even among the nobility was only 29.6 years (Thomas, 1971: 5). Epidemic diseases including smallpox and plague periodically cut swathes through all ranks of society; the undernourished were particularly vulnerable, but poor sanitation and hygiene - reflecting deficiencies in medical knowledge and technology - also played their part. Other hazards included frequent disastrous fires, again made worse in their consequences by organisation inadequate to control them (Thomas, 1971: 15). But nothing was more bound up with the overall insecurity of life than the precariousness of food supplies. And nothing contributed more fundamentally to that than harvest failure.

The historical record of harvest failure and famine is incomplete, and the evidence not always easy to assess. However, it is clear that throughout the medieval and early modern period subsistence crises were very frequent. Even the shrinking back of the margin of cultivation onto more productive land after the Black Death did not long prevent them. During this period, the age of deserted villages and abundant pasture, production of meat rose very considerably throughout Western Europe, and in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries meat appears to have formed a larger part of the diet of even the humbler strata than it had done previously or was to do in the sixteenth century once more (Abel, 1953; 1937). As population rose again, the increased degree of pastoralism built into the mode of production made food even shorter when harvests failed, as they continued to do. It has been estimated that between 1375 and 1791, Florence experienced 111 poor harvests, one in four, and only 16 really good harvests (E. Weber, 1953: 194).

In England, in the period 1500–1660, about one harvest in six appears to have been a serious failure (Hoskins, 1964; 1968). Conditions in France appear generally to have been worse than in England. Goubert's work on the Beauxais (1960) gives a striking impression of the spectre of hunger there in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. A period of relative agricultural prosperity in France in the middle of the seventeenth century was broken by increasingly frequent major harvest failures in the later part of that and the early part of the next century. The consequences of harvest failures were more intense when they followed closely on each other: there were major famines in France in 1680, 1694 and 1709–10.

Sometimes whole countries or even large parts of the continent were short of food at the same time. An example is the great European famine of 1315–17. At the peripheries of Europe, whole countries continued to suffer disastrous depopulation through famine until relatively recent times: a third of the population of Finland died in 1696–7; East Prussia lost nearly half its population at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and as late as 1770 a quarter of a million people died of famine and accompanying epidemics in Bohemia — a tenth of the total (Behrens, in Rich and Wilson, 1977: 575, 614).

Often, however, only a limited region was affected by harvest failure, though before authorities were able to organise the holding of sufficient stocks of grain, and before trade and transport were adequate to remedy local
The Civilising of Appetite

shortage, they could be serious enough. Inadequate transport meant that food could not be moved, or could be moved only with difficulty, from surplus to deficit areas. Shortages led to panic buying, hoarding and speculation, prices soaring and putting what food was available for sale quite beyond the means of the poor. Holding stocks could have helped to remedy this, but administrative difficulties defeated most governments before the late seventeenth or eighteenth century. On top of all this, in times of famine, vagrancy could become ‘a veritable scourge’, adding to the insecurity of life in already hard times. And finally it has to be remembered that war too could bring about famine, as did the Wars of Religion in France from 1560 onwards.

In times of dearth, what did people eat in order to survive? Ladurie quotes a description of the people of the Vivarais countryside in 1585–6 being ‘forced to eat acorns, wild roots, bracken, marc and grape seeds dried in the oven and ground into flour – not to mention pine bark and the bark of other trees, walnut and almond shells, broken tiles and bricks mixed with a few handfuls of barley, oats or bran flour’ (1966: 198). Bread made from a mixture of couch grass and sheep’s entrails is also recorded (Ladurie, 1966: 244). Some people forced themselves to eat bark bread from time to time even when food was plentiful, knowing that otherwise their stomachs would be unable to digest it when, the harvest having failed, they had no choice (E. Weber, 1973: 197). Indeed, differences in the digestive powers of various social classes were generally taken for granted, and it was accepted that the lower orders were capable in times of dearth of surviving on coarse foods which their superiors could not eat (O’Hara-May, 1977: 118–19).

For centuries harvest failures were inevitably followed by abrupt upward movements in mortality – ‘steeples’ of mortality Goubert calls them, from the appearance of the graphs. Not that even in the worst times a great proportion of people actually starved to death. But hunger made many more susceptible to disease. And others who survived the immediate famine had their lifespan curtailed by the effects of hunger and malnutrition. The direct relationship between harvest failures and soaring rates of mortality only gradually disappeared from Western Europe from the late seventeenth century onwards. By then, large grain stocks held, for example, at Amsterdam were helping to alleviate the effects of death not only in the Low Countries but in coastal and other areas of neighbouring countries accessible to trade. In the eighteenth century, food production increased markedly, but so did population. There was more food, though not necessarily greater consumption per capita. Food supplies, however, became gradually more reliable and shortages less frequent. After 1750, according to Braudel and Spooner (in Rich and Wilson, 1977: 396), only ‘suppressed’ famines (‘almost bearable ones’) continued to occur in Western Europe, very largely because of improvements in trade and transport, the effects of which can be seen in the levelling out of food prices plotted (as on a weather map) across the continent. In England scarcity following crop failures no longer reached famine proportions by the first decade of the eighteenth century, though food prices rose very high and death rates were still noticeably up in years of bad harvests in the 1720s and 1740s. In France, the last full nationwide famine was that of 1709–10, but regional deprivations accompanied by rising mortality still happened as late as 1795–6 and 1810–12 (Cobb, 1970: 220–2).

Improved trade and transport were not altogether straightforward in their effects:

the growth of trade, if it enabled the surplus of one region rather more often than before to relieve the dearth of another, also left a larger number of people at the mercy of market fluctuation, tended to depress or hold down real wages, and increase the gap between the rich and the poor. (Wrenham, 1968: 5)

This conflict between national markets and local needs was one reason why food riots were still common in eighteenth-century England and France (Tilly, 1975: 380–455; Rudé, 1964; E.P. Thompson, 1971; Cobb, 1970).

Another reason was more important: what could not immediately disappear with general famines was the fear of going hungry engendered by centuries of experience. Mandrou observes that one of the most characteristic features of early modern Europe was ‘the obsession with starving to death, an obsession which varied in intensity according to locality and class, being stronger in the country than in the town, rare among the upper-classes and well-fed fighting men, and constant among the lower classes’ (1961: 26–7). The themes of starvation, child abandonment and outright cannibalism so common in European folklore are further evidence of the pervasive fear of food scarcity. As late as 1828, notes Cobb (1970: 215), dearth was still being written about as a major threat to public order in France, because ‘the fear of dearth was permanent, especially at the lower levels of society, and it took very little at any time for this fear to become hysterical and to develop into the proportions of panic’.

FASTING, GLUTTONY, THE CHURCH AND THE STATE

In these circumstances, self-control over appetite was scarcely a pressing problem for the vast majority of Europeans from medieval until relatively recent times.

At first glance, the large number of fasts expected of the fervent Catholic by the Church in the high Middle Ages might be seen as evidence of pressures to self-control over appetite. Fasting was in theory required on three days a week (Wednesday, Friday and Saturday), for major saints’ days, for three days at each of the Quarter Days, and for the whole of Lent except Sundays. Strict fasting consisted essentially of eating only once in 24 hours, after
Vespers, and as far as possible then eating only bread and water. But, of course, for all but the most ascetic, fish was permitted, as were vegetables, but wine as well as meat and any other animal product were excluded (Franklin, 1887–1902: VIII, 124ff.; Henisch, 1976: 28–50). As time passed, the Church made more and more exceptions, such as permitting eggs to be eaten on fast days – and made the requirements less stringent, but in principle the rules still applied in Catholic countries towards the end of the eighteenth century. After the Reformation, the Protestant churches generally disapproved of fasting on specific days as an integral part of Catholic ritual. In a characteristic compromise, the Elizabethan Church of England frowned on fasting as a form of display, though it allowed that at the discretion of individuals it could be a useful adjunct to prayer; and it adjured Christians to observe fasts decreed by law, not for religious but for political reasons:

as when any realm in consideration of the maintenance of fisher-towns bordering upon the seas, and for the increase of fishermen, of whom do spring mariners to go upon the sea, to the furnishing of the Navy of the Realm, whereby not only commodities of other countries may be transported, but also may be a necessary defence to resist the invasion of the adversary. (Anon., Homilies, 1562: 300; cf. O'Hara-May, 1977: 12ff.)

Yet even when and where the Church's authority fully upheld the ritual of fasting, how much difference did it effectively make to how much people actually ate? The majority of people would have considered themselves fortunate if there were meat to eat as often as four days a week. Nor did the rules of fasting do anything to impede their enjoyment of the great binges which at times of plenty relieved the monotony and sparsity of their usual diet. As for the minority for whom plenty was not exceptional, they could eat sumptuously even on jours maîtres, breaking not the letter but merely the spirit of the fasting rules. How little abstinence a dinner on a fish day might represent is suggested by the vigil dinner set before Sir Gawain on Christmas Eve:

Several fine soups, seasoned lavishly
Twice-fald, as is fitting, and fish of all kinds –
Some baked in bread, some browned on coals,
Some seathed, some stewed and savoured with spices,
But always subtly sauced, and so the man liked it.
The gentle knight generously judged it a feast,
And often said so, while the servers spurred
him on thus
As he ate
'This present penance do;
It soon shall be offset.'

(c. 1400: 54–5)

Much later, French courtly recipe books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also show what could be achieved within the rules on jours maîtres. In fact, the observance of fasting in the medieval and early modern period has all the hallmarks of – to use Elias's terms – 'external constraints' (Fremdzwang) rather than 'self-restraints' (Selbstzwang). That is to say, there is very little evidence of people having internalised the controls the rules embodied; few evidently felt any personal guilt or repugnance at breaking the rules. In any case, the prescribed fasts in their full severity were probably only ever observed in some religious orders. And such exceptional instances of extreme abstinence are indeed a symptom of the unevenness of controls over eating. Very gradually there was to take place a process of development towards more even controls and – eventually – to less marked differences in dietary regimes between strata. But in this process, the teachings of the Church seem not to have played any very significant part.

Gluttony, it is true, was always counted a sin, but the Church did not on the whole inveigh against it with the enthusiasm it brought to bear on drunkenness. This point is partly obscured, in the English sources at least, by the fact that the one word, gluttony, was used in the Middle Ages to refer to both excessive eating and excessive drinking; it acquired its modern reference exclusively to excessive eating only much later (Oswt, 1935: 455). The teaching of the Church appears to have contained a strong counterpoint of 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die' (1 Cor. XV: 32). Its authority rested on such texts as Galatians 5, in which St Paul condemns drunkenness – but not specifically gluttony in the modern sense – for its leading to a loss of self-control and thereby to the commission of various other deadly sins. It is mainly excessive drinking which Langland depicts in Piers Plowman (c. 1390: 70–2). St Augustine's earlier denunciation of the enjoyment of food (amongst all other sensual pleasures) appears, despite his general prominence in medieval theology, to have had little practical influence on the Church's attitudes. Gluttony in the modern sense of overeating was usually mentioned as an adjunct to drunkenness, and this continued to be the emphasis in such Protestant treatments of the subject as found in the Elizabethan Homilies (1562: 309–21), the Stuart divine Jeremy Taylor (1854: III, 47–53; IV, 180–206), and John Wesley (1829–31: VII, 32). The Societies for the Reformation of Manners active in England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries seem to have been concerned with drunkenness to the exclusion of gluttony (Bahlman, 1957). The reason is simple: the lower orders scarcely had the opportunity to indulge in that vice. Where gluttony in the modern sense was specifically the target of criticism from the medieval pulpits, it was because the glutton wasted the fruit of other men's labours. As Oswt comments,

This latter point proves that the vice had an important bearing on the whole social problem of rich and poor, a bearing, indeed, which those who expressly viewed society as a delicately adjusted system of mutually dependent parts could never afford to overlook. Hence the special enmity of those who 'reckon not what they spende, so that her mouth be feed deliciously' whilst others lack. (1933: 445)

Perhaps more significant than the Church's teaching is that from the late
from a glance at the magnificent amplitude of the human frame so abundantly depicted by the Renaissance painters. (Glamann in Rich and Wilson, 1977: 195)

The contradictory conclusions about average girth in paintings point to the need for more systematic studies. But on the more general question of the prestige or otherwise of bodily bulk, the most likely conclusion is that while obesity which impeded health and activity was deplored (particularly by the doctors whom O’Hara-May is studying), a healthy stoutness was widely considered prestigious.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were many who seem to have noted more for their capacity than for their refinement of taste. Cathérine de’Medici was celebrated for her appetite and frequent indigestion. Diarists at the court of Louis XIV have left graphic accounts of the great king’s prodigious consumption. Nor does he appear to have been untypical of his court. The Princess Palatine often describes the overeating of the French nobility, including her son the Regent, though the Duchesse de Berri’s eating herself to death seems to have been even then considered an instance of a pathologically abnormal appetite (Orléans, 1855: 1, 348; II, 51, 85, 131, 143).

Faint traces of the beginnings of pressures towards self-restraint in appetite can be seen a century earlier. In appetite as in so many other facets of the civilising process, Montaigne is a good witness (Mennell, 1981a). He reports that he himself has little self-restraint in eating, but bemoans the fact:

if they preach abstinence once a dish is in front of me, they are wasting their time... To eat greedily as I do, is not only harmful to health, and even to one’s pleasure, but it is unmanly into the bargain. So hurried am I that I often bite my tongue, and sometimes my fingers... My greed leaves me no time for talk. (1595a: 394)

By the mid-eighteenth century extreme gluttony appears to have become the exception. Louis XVI, who saw off chicken, lamb cutlets, eggs, ham and a bottle and a half of wine before setting out to hunt, without it diminishing his appetite at dinner, appears to have been considered something of a throwback:

By his appetite, and by his appetite alone did the unfortunate Louis XVI revive memories of Louis XIV. Like him, he did not bother himself with cookery, nor with any refinements; to him, always afraid of not having enough to eat, sheer quantity was more important than anything else; he did not eat, he stuffed himself, going as far as to incapacitate himself at his wedding dinner, scandalising his grandfather (Louis XVI). (Gotshalk, 1939: 232)

In England, another famous trencherman of that time, Dr Johnson, though of less exalted social rank, was also considered a coarse eater. Not only did he show so little sense of what was proper as to call for the boat containing the lobster sauce left over from the previous course and pour it over his
plum-pudding (Piozzi, 1783), but he wolfed his food down in a shameful manner:

When at table, Johnson was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed riveted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce and indulged with such intemperance that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled and generally a strong perspiration was evident. To those whose sensations were delicate, this could not but be disgusting; and it was doubtless not very suitable to the character of a philosopher, who should be distinguished by self-command. (Boswell, 1791: I, 523)

Significantly, Boswell comments that everything about Johnson’s character and manners was forcible and violent, and adds ‘Johnson, though he could be rigidly abstemious, was not a temperate man either in eating or drinking. He could refrain, but he could not use moderately.’ That sounds very much like a throwback to the mode of behaviour typical of medieval and early modern Europe. But by the mid-eighteenth century it was no longer considered quite the right thing in the better circles. What changes were taking place?

The civilising of appetite, if we may call it that, appears to have been partly related to the increasing security, regularity, reliability and variety of food supplies. But just as the civilising of appetite was entangled with several other strands of the civilising process, including the transformation of table manners, so the improvement in food supplies was only one strand in a complex of developments within the social figure which together exerted a compelling force over the way people behaved. The increased security of food supplies was made possible by the extension of trade, the progressive division of labour in a growing commercial economy, and also by the process of state-formation and internal pacification. Even a small improvement was enough to enable a small powerful minority to distinguish themselves from the lower ranks of society by the sheer quantities they ate and the regularity with which they ate them. As the improvement continued, somewhat wider segments of the better-off groups in society came to be able to copy the élite. The same structural processes, however, served not only to permit social imitation but positively to promote it. The longer chains of social interdependence produced by state-formation and the division of labour tended to balance the power little by little towards lower social groups, leading to increased pressure ‘from below’ and intensified social competition. The umbrulous laws, with their vain attempt to relate quantities eaten to social rank, seem symptomatic of that.

By the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, for the nobility to eat quantitatively more than they did would have been physically impossible. That was one reason for increasing demands made upon the skill of the cook in making food more palatable; as a modern expert explains,

A variety of studies demonstrates that hunger and palatability are substitutive for each other and algebraically additive in their effects. Equal amounts are eaten of a highly palatable food in a minimal state of hunger and even without hunger, and of a minimally palatable food in a state of hunger. Thus it is equally true to assume that hunger potentiates palatability and that palatability potentiates hunger in their common effect of eliciting eating. The consequence of this relationship is that the differential palatability of two foods decreases with increased hunger. (Le Magnen, 1972: 76)

Or, as a nineteenth-century classic of dietetics put it,

Appetite . . . may . . . be educated or trained to considerable deviations from the ordinary standard of quantity and quality . . . . The most common source . . . of the errors into which we are apt to fall in taking appetite as our only guide, is unquestionably the confounding of appetite with taste, and continuing to eat for the gratification of the latter long after the former is satisfied. In fact, the whole science of a skilful cook is expended in producing this willing mistake on our part. (Combe, 1846: 29–30)

Here then is the psychological basis for the elaboration of cooking in an age of plenty. And the skills of cooks had another advantage: they could be applied not simply to stimulating the sated appetites of the glutton, but also to the invention and elaboration of an endless variety of ever more refined and delicate dishes; when the possibilities of quantitative consumption for the expression of social superiority had been exhausted, the qualitative possibilities were inexhaustible.

Later chapters will explore in detail the links between the growing arts of the cook, developing conceptions of refined taste, and changing patterns of social contest. Broadly speaking, the break with medieval cookery which seems to have begun in the city-courts of Renaissance Italy and spread to the noble courts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, involved a shift in emphasis from quantitative display to qualitative elaboration. By the eighteenth century the fashion for more varied and delicate ragoûts was spreading from courtly circles to the bourgeoisie. Louis-Sebastien Mercier noted towards the end of the century how fashions had changed:

In the last century, they used to serve huge pieces of meat, and pile them up in pyramids. These little dishes, costing ten times as much as one of those big ones, were not yet known. Delicate eating has been known for only half a century. The delicious cuisine of the reign of Louis XV was unknown even to Louis XIV. (1783: V, 597–8)

The tendency for courtly models of eating to be emulated by the bourgeoisie probably gave increased impetus to the movement towards greater delicacy and self-restraint. The connections are complex. We have noted that courtly fashion moved towards the proliferation of small, delicate and costly dishes, and that knowledgeability and a sense of delicacy in matters of food became something of a mark of the courtier. Now a sense of delicacy implies a degree of restraint too, in so far as it involves discrimination and selection, the
rejection as well as the acceptance of certain foods or combinations of foods, guided at least as much by social proprieties as by individual fancies. No courtly gourmet would pour the lobster sauce over his plum pudding. But while the development of systems of fashionable preferences involves a degree of rationalisation, the courtly ethos was antithetical to that of bourgeois economic rationality; lavish consumption was too closely part of the courtier’s social identity for him to economise like a good bourgeois. While there is plenty of evidence that, in France at least, the bourgeoisie wanted in the eighteenth century to follow courtly models of eating, it is also clear that most did not have the resources to eat on such a lavish scale; they were therefore both under more pressure than the nobility to choose and select, and also more easily able to do so. The bourgeoisie was in many ways a more appropriate couche for the emergence of a body of gastronomic theorising. When it did emerge, the theorists were indeed members of the high bourgeoisie, and the themes of delicacy and self-restraint were prominent in their writings, the latter increasingly so as time went on.

GASTRONOMY AND MODERATION

Sociologists have argued that political security and economic surplus are prerequisites for the development of the cultural syndrome of bourgeois rationality as a whole (Elías, 1962). It seems no coincidence that gastronomic theorising as a genre first appeared during the period when the insecurity of food supplies ceased to be of catastrophic proportions, and burgeoned fully during the nineteenth century.

The notion of régime alimentaire began to be prominent in medical circles in the eighteenth century, and was reflected in the writings of Rousseau, who advocated moderation and pure foods (Aron, 1961: 971–7). Early in the century, both in England and France, a number of doctors advocated strictures as a way to health. 13 Jones and Sonnenscher (1983) have described how, in the century, the diet of hospital inmates was the subject of conflict between doctors and nurses at the Hôtel-Dieu in Nîmes. The nursing sisters had traditionally seen their role as a charitable one and, aware that many illnesses had resulted from repeated subsistence crises, saw it as their duty to feed up the poor and needy ill. One of the doctors at Nîmes complained bitterly against the overplentifulness of the patients’ diet, which often impeded their recovery. ‘They are always afraid in this hospital that people will die of hunger . . . they always feed the sick too much.’ A colleague in neighbouring Montpellier in the 1760s documented how overfeeding by the sisters had led to patients’ premature deaths, and ‘gave the impression that over-eating was one of the major causes of hospital mortality!’ Significantly, the doctors in an eighteenth-century Montpellier also launched an onslaught on the tradition of marking the hospital’s patron saint’s day with feasting.

Although the social power of the medical profession was growing during the eighteenth century, it would be incautious to overemphasise the influence of advancing medical knowledge in pressuring people to exercise self-control over appetite. To reiterate Elías’s argument, ‘rational understanding’ is not the motor of the ‘civilising’ of powerful drives like those which govern eating. As far back as the Salerno School medical opinion had favoured moderation in eating, and there is little evidence to suggest that their opinions had had much effect on people’s daily eating habits in the past. Still less is it safe to assume that philosophers like Rousseau had great practical impact on such mundane behaviour; it is not easy to find any signs of explicit influence even on gastronomic theorising, which after the Revolution most closely reflected feelings about taste and eating in the upper strata of society.

Neither Grimo d’I la Reynière (1803–12) nor Brillat-Savarin (1826), the two most noted pioneers of gastronomy, entirely dismissed a large capacity as an epicurean virtue. But their writings emphasise the need for a discriminating palate and scorn any merely quantitative display. They set the pattern for gastronomic writing in both France and England for the rest of the century. An Englishman strongly influenced by Grimo writes in 1822:

Gluttony is, in fact, a mere effort of the appetite, of which the coarsest bolter of bacon in all Hampshire may equally boast with the most distinguished consumer of turtle in a Corporation; while Epicureanism is the result of ‘that choicest gift of Heaven’, a refined and discriminating taste: this is the peculiar attribute of the palate, that of the stomach. It is the happy combination of both these enviable qualities that constitutes that truly estimable character, the real epicure. He is not only endowed with a capacious stomach and an insatiable appetite, but with a delicate susceptibility in the organs of degustation, which enables him to appreciate the true relish of each ingredient in the most compound ragout, and to detect the slightest aberration of the cook; added to which advantages, he possesses a profound acquaintance with the rules of art in all the most approved schools of cookery, and an enlightened judgment on their several merits, matured by long and sedulous experience. (Sturgeon, 1822: 3–4)

A few decades later, in 1868, another writer bemoans England’s lagging behind France in gastronomic savoir-faire, and now directly disparages the lack of discrimination masked by plenty:

Not only our merchant princes, but our gentry and nobility, have merely a superficial knowledge of the science of cookery and the art of giving good dinners. Consider the barbarism implied in the popular phrase for ample hospitality! The table is described as groaning under the plenty of the host. (Jerroll, 1868: 5)

By the twentieth century, the theme of moderation was still more explicit. G. F. Scotton-Clark, in a book entitled Eating without Fears published in 1924, writes that

Consuming large quantities of food is only a habit. What is often called a ‘healthy appetite’ is nothing of the sort. The only people who should eat really large quantities of food are those whose regular daily life involves a vast amount of physical exercise – like the road-mender. (1924: 65)
And André L. Simon reiterates an argument prominent in his extensive writings between the 1930s and 1960s: 'There cannot be any intelligent choice nor real appreciation where there is excess. Gastronomy stands or falls by moderation. No gourmand and no glutton can be a gastronome' (1969: 94). The theme of moderation was now becoming clearly linked to questions of health as well as discrimination. Scotton-Clark says:

Cookery plays such a large part in our life, it is really the fundamental basis of our life, our very existence, that it is foolish to belittle its importance. To take no interest in it is as bad for one’s health as to take no interest in one’s ablutions. An individual should cultivate his palate just as much as he should cultivate his brain. Good taste in food and wine is as necessary as good taste in art, literature and music, and the very fact of looking upon gastronomy as one of the arts will keep a man from becoming that most disgusting of creatures, a glutton.

I am sure that moderation is the keynote of good health, and I contend that anyone can eat anything I mention in this book, without increasing his girth, and if taken in moderation he can reduce to normal weight. It is not necessary for one to deprive oneself of all the things one loves, for fear of getting too fat, but it is necessary to take an intelligent interest in the provender with which one intends to stoke the human furnace. (1924: 8–9)

At about the same time in France, Édouard de Pomiane, the medical doctor turned cookery writer, was developing similar themes (1922).

The problem and the fear of being overweight seems, not surprisingly, to have started towards the top of the social scale and progressed steadily downwards. The ‘magnificent amplitude of the human frame’ which once constituted the cultural model was gradually replaced by the ideal of the slim figure. The changing standard of beauty among the upper strata can be seen around the time of the Romantic movement, when ‘for both women and men paleness, frailness, slenderness became the vogue’ (J. H. Young, 1970: 16). Burnett (1966: 80) quotes some fairly abstemious diets recommended for well-to-do ladies at that period. Exactly when the ideal began to be reflected in an actual decline in typical body weights, and how the decline progressed down the social scale, is very difficult to demonstrate. Given the complexities of relating body weights to height, age and sex, let alone to social class, little in the way of time-series data over the long period required is available or likely to become available. An interesting clue is an article by Sir Francis Galton in Nature, in 1884, comparing the weights of three generations of British nobleman among the customers of Berry Brothers’, grocers and wine-merchants in St James’s, London, from the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth (see figure 3). The evidence is far from conclusive, but it does suggest that by the late nineteenth century men in the highest stratum of English society were no longer putting on weight so rapidly as young men as their fathers and grandfathers had done. They reached the same weight in the end, but possibly this is consistent with them having overstayed slightly but persistently rather than indulging in dramatically excessive over eating. Whatever happened to actual body weights, however, there is plenty of evidence of the worry that subject caused in the upper reaches of society. Gastronomic writers from Brillat-Savarin to Ali-Bab (1907) discussed obesity as a worry and affliction among gourmets. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, great innovating chefs such as Escoffier, Philéas Gilbert and Prosper Montagné, cooking for a fashionable clientele, were beginning a trend towards simpler, lighter food and fewer courses. Yet at the same time, books were still being written on how to put on weight (for example, T. C. Duncan, How to Become Plump, 1878), and as will be seen in chapter 8 the cookery columns addressed to the lower-middle classes (especially in England) emphasised the need to eat fat and heavy food for body-building. The upper and upper-middle classes often commented on the greed of servants.

In towns we often observe the bad effects of overfeeding in young female servants recently arrived from the country. From being accustomed to constant exercise in the open air, and to the comparatively in nutritive diet on which the labouring classes subsist, they pass all at once, with appetite, digestion and health in their fullest vigour, to the confinement of a house, to the impure atmosphere of a crowded city, and to a rich and stimulating diet. Appetite, still keen, is freely indulged; but waste being diminished, fullness is speedily induced. . . . (Combe, 1846: 217)

And, at Buckingham Palace (no less), at the turn of the century:

The plentiful meals of those days naturally enough encouraged greed, particularly among some of the servants. After a five-course breakfast those who visited the
kitchens often slipped two or three hardboiled eggs into their pockets to help them last out the next few hours until it was time for morning tea. (Tscharni, 1954: 63)

It is hardly surprising if people drawn from ranks of society where the worry for centuries had been simply getting enough to eat did not immediately develop self-control when suddenly confronted with plentiful food.

Even at the present day, in the world’s affluent societies the incidence of obesity is highest in the lower and poorer strata, in contrast to the countries of the Third World where it occurs only among the privileged few (Bruch, 1974: 14). Obviously the plentiful availability of food is a prerequisite for the development of obesity, but clinical evidence suggests that psychological pressures to overeat are often rooted in past hunger, perhaps in a previous generation. For instance, among the mothers of obese children in America,

Many of these women had been poor immigrants who had suffered hunger during their early lives. They did not understand why anyone should object to a child’s being big and fat, which to them indicated success and freedom from want. (Bruch, 1974: 15)

Conversely, cases of anorexia nervosa arise disproportionately among the more well-to-do strata. There may have been instances of this affliction, which is far more common among females than males, in earlier centuries. A number of ‘miraculously fasting’ girls are known to have attracted attention from the sixteenth century onwards, and though several were probably frauds, some were possibly cases where psychological disturbance led to serious undereating (H. G. Morgan, 1977). The condition was however not well described, and was probably not at all common, until the latter half of the nineteenth century when it was named by Sir William Gull. Gull in England and E. Lasègue in France both gave clear accounts of it among their middle-class patients at that period. Today, it is a very familiar illness.

Again, there appears to be a clear connection with the reliable and plentiful availability of food: apparently anorexia nervosa is not reported from countries where there is still danger of widespread starvation or famine, nor among blacks and other underprivileged groups in the USA (Bruch, 1974: 13).

Anorexia nervosa and obesity can be regarded as similar if opposite urblances of the patterns of self-control over appetite now normally cited and necessary in prosperous Western societies. Though the process not yet be complete, in the course of the twentieth century the concern for weight-watching and slimming has gradually become more widespread and at all ranks of society; its progress can be observed in cookery columns in popular magazines. For example, ever since the early 1950s, the French woman’s magazine Elle has had weekly columns giving menus and recipes with calorie counts, playing on and encouraging the reader’s concern with her own weight and that of her family. A typical early instance is an article in Elle, on 2 February 1953, entitled ‘Unconscious Overeating can Threaten your Life’, with a photograph of a slim girl in a swimsuit to illustrate the prevailing body image. The not-very-subliminal connection between self-control over the appetite, slimness, health and sex-appeal is one of the most salient themes in British as well as French mass-circulation women’s magazines since the Second World War. Which is not to deny that persistent slight but definite overeating remains a characteristic problem among the populations of England, France and other Western industrial states. But a general anxiety to avoid obesity is very widespread, and the fitful extreme overeating of an earlier era seems less common.

CONCLUSION

Very broadly speaking, the increasing interdependence and more equal balances of power between social classes has been reflected in more equal distribution of foodstuffs, which in turn has been associated with somewhat greater similarity in cuisine, and also with less extreme differences between festival or banquet food and everyday eating, and with greater evenness of controls over appetite. Yet the process of the civilising of appetite is in detail more complex than it has been possible to depict it here. It has not been a simple linear development; in fact there have been spurts and reversals, exceptions and sub-themes. For example, the seasonal rhythm and ritual of early modern eating, the observance of festivals and eating of festival fare, persisted longer in the countryside than in the towns,13 where the special dishes of an earlier age have become the commonplace dishes of industrialised eating. At the opposite end of the social scale, the appetite of a figure like King Edward VII might convince us that in the early twentieth century nothing had greatly changed since the carnivorous accomplishments of the medieval nobility; but within a couple of decades of his death, British royalty too was eating relatively abstemiously food which would not be very unfamiliar to most of their subjects (Magnus, 1964: 268–9, 449; Tscharni, 1954).

All these points serve to remind us that the ‘civilising of appetite’ in the quantitative sense cannot be understood in separation from the qualitative development of cooking and conceptions of ‘good food’. This will be the main concern of the next few chapters.