



## On the idea of novelty in cuisine A brief historical insight

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Received 3 October 2011; accepted 1 November 2011

Available online 7 December 2011

### Abstract

The search of novelty in cuisine is not run in every culture: this one gets a history, which starts in France, during the 17th century. This research made cuisine evolved extensively in the entire West and changed chefs' status. The Nouvelle Cuisine, during the 1970s, changed the deal to lead to the globalized cuisine of today.

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*Keywords:* Cuisine; Novelty; Newness; Autonomy; Artist-cook; Globalization; Nouvelle Cuisine

New cooking every year;  
Because every year tastes change;  
And new kickshaws every day;  
So you must be a chemist, Justine.<sup>1</sup>

For many centuries now, it would seem that no one has ever proclaimed any true novelty in cooking. The books, which are still around from long ago are, in a certain way, a testament: for decades, even centuries, they have been used without any apparent change. However, one should not fully trust these first impressions; the same title may often be used to cover many variants: thus there has been change, but it is as if no one should know. At the same time, ethnic or popular cooking, which are based on tradition, are actually known to integrate new products or techniques often coming from afar: an example is products from the New World, which overall have not been easily accepted unless they resembled other products, indigenous and already well known, and thus were able to substitute for them. Yet in the Western world, and elsewhere for a certain portion of the population, it seems that cuisine

today should reinvent itself without end. Among those 'in the know', when one broaches the subject, one often has the impression that it was Gault and Millau who invented the principle with their 10 Commandments of Nouvelle Cuisine (New Cuisine) in 1973. And yet this idea has a much longer history, in fact appearing in the middle of the 17th century in France during the reign of Louis XIV. However, the reference to Gault and Millau, or more precisely to Nouvelle Cuisine, is not totally wrong. Effectively, as we will see, that did mark a shift: there was a before and an after.

But, really, what is novelty in cooking? The question can, in fact, be approached from two sides: from the point of view of the practitioner, he who produces, or from the point of view of the eater, he who consumes. The first would be about technique and the second about society and culture. Clearly, each contains a number of sub-categories, and each can interact with the other, often but not always in a synchronized way: sometimes, it is the technical aspect, which prevails and introduces novelty to the consumer; other times it is the opposite, new behaviors lead to the evolution of new techniques.

To better understand the phenomenon, it is necessary to perform a quick survey of the history of novelty in cooking from both points of view. Effectively, if the history of recipes and of cuisine in general is well documented for a number of years, whether in the short term (the appearance of written

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<sup>1</sup>Verse from the end of the 18th century cited, without specifying author or origin, by Wheaton (1984).



recipes) or in the long term (the evolution of cooking), the social and interpersonal context in which these recipes and techniques fit is much less known. But, both from the point of view of the cook and of his public, it is not less important. We can then tackle the transformations of the last half century, which have caused a radical evolution in the concept of novelty. Keeping everything in proportion, the theory developed by Thomas Kühn for the history of science provides a useful tool for thinking about cuisine. According to Kühn, ‘normal’ science, that which, at a given moment, is the norm for the scientific world, becomes no longer acceptable and in order to progress it is necessary to look for a new value system (or paradigm) in which to place the world. We can apply this to the two histories of cooking and look for these break points.

Additionally, the phenomenon of *Haute Cuisine* (High Cuisine) was born in France and French cooking has been the reference for a long time. The first two parts of this article will cover these ideas, up to and including *Nouvelle Cuisine* or New Cuisine; they will be dedicated to the development of the idea of novelty in this country, France, which has had a major role despite sometimes being reticent. In England, protests against French cuisine will always remain alive (Mennell, 1987), in Italy at the end of the 19th century, Artusi tried to give that country a national cuisine (Capatti and Massimo, 2002); in both cases, it was actually the concept of *Haute Cuisine*, which was contested and we will see how it was in France that this concept truly evolved. The last part of the article will cover global developments in *Haute Cuisine* from this transitional period onwards.



# LETTRE

D'UN

## PATISSIER ANGLAIS,

AU NOUVEAU CUISINIER  
Français.



**L**ES Gourmands & les gens de Lettres sont également charmés, Monsieur, du d'écrite Avertissement qui est à la tête de votre Ouvrage. On y découvre à la fois le ton d'un homme du monde, le goût d'un Sçavant consommé dans la littérature, & les talens d'un excellent Cuisinier. Le stile dont il est écrit, & le ton que vous sçavez donner à vos pensées, vous assurent une place honorable à l'Académie, lorsque les talens y seront plus communément admis.

Si la plupart de nos Auteurs avoient aussi bien employé leur tems que vous, Monsieur, ils ne se plaindroient pas, comme ils font, de la mauvaise chere qu'on fait sur le Parnasse.

A

## An idea not as new as all that...

### First appearances

In the West, the idea of *Haute Cuisine*, that is to say a cuisine radically different in principle from ‘home cooking’ and not simply a ‘richer’ version of it, was born when two apparently unrelated events occurred. One was the ambitions of Louis XIV who, after a period of revolt in which the nobility took advantage of the young king, wanted to bring them back into line, and the second was the publication in 1651 by François La Varenne of *Cuisinier François* (The French Cook), the first book on French cooking to appear in several decades. The coming to power of Louis XIV, and the politics put in place with the help of his minister Colbert to divert the nobility, was a pivotal moment in a general quest for novelty. Briefly, this was part of a strategy of distinction imposed by the king on the Court of Versailles, which put in place a double rivalry. The first at the heart of the aristocracy itself, and the second between them and the middle class (Elias, 1969; Mennell, 1987); these pushed a society still living in a universe based on tradition (Tarde, 1890) into the universe of fashion (in a grand sense).

The other pivotal event or, more exactly, that which was going to give the means to satisfy the demand for novelty as applied to cuisine, was the publication of ‘Le Cuisinier François’. This work by La Varenne confirmed, in effect, not only unexpected changes in a diet followed by the French since the Renaissance, but also claims to originality. It put forth the idea of national identity so well – the works in circulation before its publication were mostly translations or adaptations from Italian – in that the appropriateness of the recipes were to the tastes of the day in the best society (he was the ‘squire of cooking’ for the Marquis of Uxelles). He also advocated the search for ‘natural’ flavor – a feature that would serve as a link throughout the long history of French cooking – by recommending the abandonment of spices and their replacement by indigenous aromatic plants, the use of thick and rich sauces flavored differently than previously used acidic ones, the progressive separation of sweet and savoury, and a new interest in vegetables. On the other hand, he was a chef and not a head-waiter as had been the Italians, and it is notable also that it was one of the first times that a chef had attained such power (Sabbatini and Serventi, 1998). Last but not least, his book was organized in a different way: for the first time recipes were separated by service but also discriminating between ‘fat days’ and ‘lean days’ and also times of Lent. This new arrangement allowed him to understand that in many different recipes there are identical sequences, and the isolation of these allowed the construction of root or base recipes. This was the beginning of the ‘modular’ concept (Fink, 1995) in French *Haute Cuisine*, which became a characteristic of Western *Haute Cuisine* in general, and allowed an almost infinite regeneration of recipes and the production of a sort of machine to produce novelty, which cooks through Escoffier have not ceased to try and perfect. This process allowed variations, and they were

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