

Birthday toast to a gourmet

# Be patriotic: go out to dinner this evening

APRIL 1 happens to be the birthday of the great genius of French gastronomy, Brillat-Savarin. In the course of his eventful life, he fled the Terror during the French Revolution, spent three years as a refugee in America, and wrote pamphlets on everything from the history of dueling to political economy. His "*Physiologie du*

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*gout*," however, a landmark work on taste in food, was his masterpiece. In it, he vigorously attacked those who equated good eating with gluttony. *Gourmandise*, he argued indignantly, is "a passionate, rational and habitual preference for all that flatters the palate. It stimulates the transport from pole to pole of wines, spirits, sugar spices, pickles, savouries, indeed provisions of every kind, down to eggs and melons."

Brillat-Savarin had been a lawyer before the late unpleasantness of the French Revolution, and died in 1826 in Paris, after a fruitful career in the judiciary under Napoleon. His lifetime encompassed sweeping changes in government, in the economy, in the way in which ordinary people lived. He wrote about it, brooded about it, and came up with a homely philosophical system to meet the contingencies of fate.

Eating well, he contended, is the best revenge; it is also the solution to all social ills, from economy to fraternity. "It is this which affords a livelihood to the industrious multitude of cooks, confectioners, pastrycooks and other diversely named purveyors of food, who, in their turn, rely for the satisfaction of their needs on workers of all kinds. This gives rise, always and everywhere, to a wealth of economic activity, of which even the most lively mind cannot calculate the extent nor assess the value. *Gourmandise* is a great source of fiscal revenue. It contributes towards city tolls, customs dues, indirect taxation. Dues are paid on everything we eat. There is no public treasury which the gourmand does not support." An interesting point to make in tax time. As you struggle with your returns, you might regard it, as Brillat-Savarin did, as a patriotic fiscal duty to go out to dinner.

Preferably with your spouse. Happy marriage concerned Brillat-Savarin. "The husband and wife," he ruminated solemnly, "are called to the table by shared need. They remain there to gratify it. In the course of the meal each shows to the other those little marks of consideration which spring from the desire to please. The agreeable atmosphere of a shared meal contributes much to a happy life." What the gentle Frenchman would make of company cafeterias and fast food you eat slow is not hard to guess. He would unhesitatingly condemn them as enemies of civilization and insidious underminers of world, as well as domestic, peace.

For the passionate consumer of comestibles saw good eating as the key to the universal brotherhood - and sisterhood - of humankind. Waxing lyrical, he envisioned *gourmandise* as "responsible for the gradual spread of that spirit of conviviality which every day brings together people of different social levels, welds them into a single whole, enlivens conversation and rubs off the corners of conventional social inequality."

It would be easy but inaccurate to dismiss Brillat-Savarin's vision as the maunderings of a man who lived in simpler times. He did not live in simple times; he lived when political betrayal was at flood tide; the streets of Paris were cobbled in blood, and the smell of neighbors' corpses hung over the City of Light in a reeking fume.

To survive, he served as a commissioner to the army in Germany and played violin in a theater orchestra. After years of hard times, he came home to France and published, at his own expense, his answer to the vicissitudes of life. Stop and taste good food in pleasant company, and help others to do the same, and the world will be a better place, he said.

Next time you shove a frozen dinner of calibrated calories into the microwave and settle down to eat it with the evening news, you might remind yourself of his spectral voice, muttering disapprovingly in the background: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are."

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