

Saturday 24 Sept. 2005

Slow Food Brillat-Savarin Paris-New York transatlantic meal

Paris : intervention de Maurice Bensoussan (en français et en anglais)

Maurice Bensoussan

Brillat-Savarin : un traître à la gastronomie française ?

Le scandale éclate en février 1926, après les manifestations du centenaire de la mort de Brillat-Savarin. Des gourmets reprochent au magistrat de Belley d'être resté trop longtemps aux Etats-Unis, au point d'avoir contracté de fort mauvaises habitudes qui, par *Physiologie du Goût* interposé, polluent notre façon de se comporter à table.

Tout le monde avait reconnu la qualité des observations de Brillat-Savarin qui s'était promis, une fois sur place, de *parler comme eux* (les Américains), *s'habiller comme eux*, à *trouver bon tout ce qu'ils font*. C'est cette perméabilité qui lui est reprochée par ceux qui n'admettent pas

- qu'il ait pris plaisir à boire le thé parfumé aux *Florida gardens* de New York
- qu'il ait accompagné la *soupe à la tortue* et le *Welsh rabbit* servis dans une taverne de Broadway, d'*ale*, bière légère, alors qu'un vrai gourmet aurait marié ces plats avec du vin.
- qu'il ait avalé force rasades de *punch*, lors d'une compétition d'endurance aux effets de l'alcool, sans émettre de critique sur l'affreux breuvage.
- qu'il ait éprouvé un plaisir d'orgueil de voir son exploit rapporté par une feuille de New York, attitude qui dénote une *méconnaissance complète de la gastronomie* et une grande complaisance avec les gros mangeurs.
- que dans une ferme du Connecticut où il a préparé un repas sans vin, qu'il trouve délectable le thé préparé par le fille de son hôte, peut-être parce qu'elle était fort agréable à regarder.
- qu'à Boston chez *Julian's Restaurator* où officiait l'ancien cuisinier de l'archevêque de Bordeaux, Jean Baptiste Gilbert Payplat, il ne parle pas de sa carte des vins. Ses potages

plaisaient aux Américains au point de gratifier le chef d'un *prince de la soupe*, alors que chacun sait, que sans vin la soupe n'est jamais bonne.

On croyait que Brillat-Savarin était le plus grand gastronome, mais par ses critiques Maurice des Ombiaux le conteste. Il fait de Brillat-Savarin le promoteur et le continuateur des habitudes néfastes introduites en France par les Yankees du corps expéditionnaire qui ont contribué à la victoire, mais ont importé les ravages de la prohibition auprès des Français.

Brillat-Savarin n'a vu que *le sucre, le café, le thé, le chocolat, les liqueurs alcooliques et tous les mélanges qui en résultent ont fait de la bonne chère un tout composé, dont le vin n'est plus qu'un accessoire plus ou moins obligé.*

D'ailleurs Beudelaire qui a tenté de *feuilleter* (La Physiologie du Goût), *le retourner dans tous les sens*, n'a pas trouvé autre chose que, *le patriarche Noé passe pour être l'inventeur du vin et que c'est une liqueur qui se fait avec le fruit de la vigne.*

Constantin-Weyer dans L'âme du vin, amplifie l'accusation contre *le goût des manies anglo-saxonnes* et dénonce le complot ourdi contre le bon vin de France. Si l'on veut *conserver encore, en France, quelques bonnes caves*, il va falloir *qu'on se décide à interdire le passage de camions automobiles(!), criminel véhicule digne de la barbarie américaine*. On doit aux Américains la faiblesse du franc, à leurs céréales qui menacent l'agriculture française, aux conserves (invention française !) américaines, la fin de la tradition culinaire des Français.

Si ces critiques étaient plus instruits, ils auraient su que la famille de Brillat a eu des vignes et fait du vin à Belley et dans ses environs. N'est-ce pas un manque de culture d'accuser un viticulteur d'incompétence dans ce domaine ?

Plus que cela :

A l'époque, les Etats-Unis n'avaient pas de *vitis vinifera* (ils mourraient du Phylloxera quand ils étaient importés).

Les vignes locales (muscadine et autres raisins sauvages) n'ont jamais produit du vin décent. La Californie ne faisait pas partie des Etats-Unis pendant la période du voyage de B.S.

Le premier hybride qui a fait le vin sans goût « foxé » était l'hybride *Alexander* découvert en Pennsylvanie en 1740 mais pas utilisé avant des années.

Après l' *Alexander*, d'autres hybrides sont apparus : *Isabella* en 1816, *Catawba* en 1823 et à la fin du siècle, *Elvira* (après 1870).

C'est en 1825 que les choses ont vraiment changé avec Nicholas Longworth, qui a lancé l'hybride *sparkling catawba*, donnant les premiers vins buvables.

Le premier livre sur la viticulture américaine est paru en 1823, écrit par le Major John Adlum du Maryland qui confirme que l'on n'avait eu aucun succès en essayant de faire du vin avec des variétés européennes.

La Californie ne faisait pas partie des Etats-Unis à l'époque.

Tout ceci signifie que B.S. ne pouvait pas boire du vin tandis qu'il visitait les Etats-Unis parce qu'il n'avait pas les moyens de payer du vin importé.

Aujourd'hui, 80 ans après le centenaire de la mort du gastronome français, nous pensons qu'il est juste de le réhabiliter. Et de réhabiliter du même coup, les Américains qui sont devenus les troisièmes producteurs du vin au monde !!!

Maurice Bensoussan

Maurice Bensoussan

Brillat-Savarin and wine :

was Brillat-Savarin a traitor to the French gastronomy ?

The scandal occurred just after the official festivities for the centenary of the death of Brillat-Savarin, when the French government allowed the preparation of a meal according to the rules laid down by the author of *La Physiologie du goût*. In the midst of much praise for the quality of the observations and the originality of the philosophical sights that Brillat-Savarin made about America, some gourmets blamed B.S. for staying there too long to the point of adopting bad habits that could pollute the way the French behave at the table!

As our Friend Giles MacDonogh has said, when B.S emigrated to America he made a decision, once there, *to speak like them* (the Americans), *to dress like them*, *to find good all that they do*. It is precisely this permeability that was criticized by those who did not accept that,

- He took pleasure in drinking scented tea at the *Florida gardens* in New York
- He drank ale with turtle soup and Welsh rarebit in a tavern on Broadway, whereas a true gourmet would have rather married these dishes with wine.
- He swallowed glassfuls of punch in a competition of resistance to alcohol, without uttering any criticism of this dreadful beverage.
- More than that, he dared to feel proud when a New York newspaper related his exploit. This attitude indicates a complete ignorance of gastronomy and a great kindness for big eaters.
- In Hartford, while eating turkey, there was no wine with the meal and B.S. found the tea prepared by the daughter of his host delicious, maybe because she was pleasant to look at.
- In Boston the former cook of the archbishop of Bordeaux, Jean Baptiste Gilbert Payplat that managed *Julian's Restaurator* (Payplat being difficult to pronounce in English) did not speak about the wines he served with his soups, while the Americans liked them and

named Payplat, *prince of the soup*. How is it possible to become prince of the soup without wine?

So, the people who believe that B-S was a great gastronome are wrong. Maurice des Ombiaux proves it and he blames Brillat-Savarin for being a promoter and a follower of the harmful practices introduced into France by the American forces during the First World War. Of course they contributed to the victory, but they also imported into France the devastation of prohibition habits, forcing Frenchmen to imitate Americans.

B-S, spoke of “*sugar, coffee, tea, chocolate, alcoholic liquors and the mixtures done with all these ingredients, made of good eating a whole, where wine is not anymore an objective ally but more or less an obliged accessory*”.

His lack of knowledge regarding wine is notorious. Baudelaire had already remarked that the only reference to wine in the *Physiologie du goût*, was that, “*wine is made with the fruit of the vine*”.

Constantin-Weyer amplifies the charges made against the taste of the Anglo-Saxon manias and accuses Brillat of being their ally. He denounces the plot against the good wine of France. “*One owes to the Americans the weakness of the franc, the threat to French agriculture from their cereals, the preserves (Food canning is a French invention!) which are destroying the culinary tradition of France and the Trucks that do not allow us to have a decent cellar in Paris !*”

If those critics were a little more learned, they would have known that the family of Brillat had vineyards and made wine for their consumption in Belley and in the surrounding countryside. It seems a glaring lack of culture to accuse a wine maker of incompetence in this field.

But more than that: Was there any wine at affordable prices in the young nation of America, during the period Brillat-Savarin was there?

We have demonstrated in *La Storia del Vino negli Stati Uniti* edited by SLOWFOOD that the United States had no *Vitis vinifera* grapes (they died from Phylloxera at the moment when they were imported).

The local vines (muscadine and other wild grapes) produced no decent wine.

California was not yet part of the United States during the time of the trip of B.S.

The first hybrid that could make wine without a foxy taste was the Alexander, discovered in Pennsylvania in 1740, but it was not used as a source of wine until ten years later. After the *Alexander*, other hybrids appeared: *Isabella* in 1816, *Catawba* in 1823, thirty years later, the *Accord* and at the end of the century, the *Elvira* (after 1870).

It is in 1825 that things really changed with a certain Nicholas Longworth, who launched the *Sparkling Catawba* as the first drinkable wine. Longfellow even made a poem about it.

The first book on American viticulture appeared in 1823, *Memoir on the Cultivation of the Vine in America and the Best Mode of Making Wine*, by Major John Adlum of Maryland. He tried to make wine from European varieties without success and discovered one day in North Carolina, the *catawba*, hybrid of *labrusca* and *riparia*.

All this clearly means that B.S. could not drink wine while he was visiting the United States because the salary he received from giving French lessons was not sufficient to pay for imported wine.

Today, 180 years after the centenary of the death of the French gastronome, it appears to us that it is only fair regarding wine, to put things straight for Brillat-Savarin and also for the United States which has become the third largest producer of wine in the world !

Maurice Bensoussan

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Paris – Première intervention de Giles MacDonogh (en anglais)

Giles MacDonogh¹

Reflections on the Third Meditation of *La Physiologie du goût* and Slow Food

When I wrote my life of Brillat-Savarin fifteen years ago, I wanted to paint a portrait of a man in his time: the provincial lawyer, the *constituant*, the local politician, the émigré, the judge, the pornographer and the gastronome. The book he wrote in the last year of his life was not to be the centre piece, even if I found numerous biographical sources in its pages. Coming back to *La Physiologie du goût* after many years, I am struck by how fresh it now sounds.

It was clear to me from the start that the man and his message were at variance. Both before and after his death, there was discussion of Brillat-Savarin's girth. By his own account, he had a slight pot-belly, but visits to his native turf were considered an excuse to relax his diet. Dr Roques informs us that he used to stop over in Bourg-en-Bresse and stuff himself with the famous local fowl. Once he rejoined the road to Belley he resembled Ptolemy Physcon: an Egyptian ruler so fat that two horses could hardly drag his chariot.

If the man Brillat was occasionally given to gluttony, the message of his greatest work is no plea for indulgence. Here is his pithy definition of gastronomy in the third *Meditation*:

“La gastronomie est la connaissance raisonnée de tout ce qui a rapport à l’homme, en tant qu’il se nourrit.

¹ Author of “The Judge and the Stomach”, a biography of Brillat-Savarin.

“Son but est de veiller à la conservation des hommes, au moyen de la meilleure nourriture possible.

“... c’est elle... qui fait mouvoir les cultivateurs, les vignerons, les pêcheurs, les chasseurs et la nombreuse famille des cuisiniers.”

Unlike Grimod de La Reyniere, the contemporary he so freely plagiarised, Brillat affirms here that we eat to live; we do not live to eat; and that we should eat the best food available: that provided for us by farmers, growers, huntsmen, and cooks – so far so good - there is no conflict with Slow Food here.

And yet I am tempted to speculate on what might have happened had he lived longer. He lived and died in a pre-industrial age. He was an amateur scientist from his earliest days, yet he did not address the idea of science gaining the upper hand in the production of food. That development, however, was only just around the corner. In 1838, only a dozen years after Brillat’s death, the Austrian August Zang (1807 – 1888) moved in at number 92 rue de Richelieu - a few doors up from Brillat’s flat at number 66 - and opened the Viennese baker’s shop that would coin the word ‘viennoiserie’. The business was slow to take off, but after a certain time his *Kipferl* (‘Kiffes’ in French) began to sell – literally- like hot cakes, and the croissant was born. All Zang’s *Kipferl* came out of his newly perfected steam oven emblazoned with the words “la main de l’homme n’y a pas touché”.

This was a selling point then. Where it might be technically true of McDonald’s burgers today, they are unlikely to tell their customers that their food is machine made. Industry is now on the defensive.

And that was France. In industrialised Britain fraud and malpractice was so endemic by 1868 that Gladstone’s government was forced to pass a bill to remove some of the more flagrant abuses: putting chalk in white bread and salt in beer, for example.

Giles Mac Donogh

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Paris – Deuxième intervention de de Giles MacDonogh (en anglais)

Giles MacDonogh

A Voyage of Gastronomic Discovery? Brillat-Savarin in the United States.

The passages relating to Brillat's exile in the United States in *La Physiologie du goût* are among the most beautiful in the whole work. The prose style has been compared to Chateaubriand, the lover of Brillat's famous cousin-by-marriage, Madame Récamier.

Brillat was unlike many of his countrymen who landed on the shores of North America after they fell foul of the Revolution: for one reason or another he was prepared to muck in. Although he had had no choice in the matter, he wanted to discover America.

The *Friendship* docked on Manhattan Island on 30 September 1794. Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and his friend Jean-Antoine de Rostaing emerged from their 80 day voyage from Rotterdam into a city recently ravaged by two terrible fires. Their first stop was the consulate, where he would have heard of Robespierre's fall and execution. He duly lodged a petition to return to his native land.

They found lodgings in Pearl Street. Rostaing went to work in the Consulate, but Brillat survived on his musical talents, playing principal fiddle in the John Street Theater – the only theatre and the only orchestra in the city. He also taught French, and to some of the more prominent citizens of New York. Brillat was not going to sulk in his tent:

“I spoke like them, I dressed like them, I was careful not to give the impression of being cleverer than they were, I found everything they did good; thereby repaying their hospitality by a

consideration which I believe necessary and which I counsel to all those people who find themselves in a similar position.”

He took an interest in the food and wine as well. He befriended the vast Edward, with his gigantic mug of beer and together with his friends the vicomte de La Massue and Jean-Rudolphe Fehr, he became embroiled in a drinking competition with a pack of British planters in Little Michael’s Tavern on Broadway.

The trio had already discovered some of the joys of the local food: turtle soup – that great eighteenth century staple – and Welsh rabbit, moistened with beer or cider. New York State was not yet celebrated for its wine. The fare at the challenge was rather more lavish: a huge joint of roast beef (befitting the British challengers), a braised turkey cock (a native American), a dish of braised vegetables called “plenty”, a salad of raw cabbage and a jam tart.

They drank *everything* and in the French fashion: claret with the meal. In Britain at the time wine was generally brought out with the entremets, at the end of the meal. There was clearly beer on tap for Fehr contrived to dispose of his wine by surreptitiously pouring it into a beer jug.

Wine led to port, port to Madeira – then a very popular drink in America – then came the spirits: rum, brandy, gin and raspberry liqueur. Brillat opted for punch which was brought in a bowl, the dimensions of which were unknown in France or Navarre. They literally drank their adversaries under the table. They left one of them, scarcely animate, trying to mouth the words of *Rule Britannia*.

Brillat lost his best friend when Rostaing returned to France on 26 May 1795. Shortly after yellow fever broke out in New York, cutting a swathe through the population of the city and killing off several of Brillat’s closest friends. The theatre was evacuated to Boston. Brillat wandered north, travelling via Hartford Connecticut.

On the way Brillat and his Irish friend King were famously entertained by a distinctly German-sounding Mr Bulow who lived near Meridien or Berlin in the Blue Mountains (now called the

Hanging Hills). Bulow had a post-colonial meal at the ready: corned beef, stewed goose and “a magnificent leg of mutton” served with root vegetables of all types. The banquet was lubricated with cider and Brillat feasted his eyes on another commodity he enjoyed - the farmer’s four teenage daughters.

Bulow told Brillat and King where they might find some game: squirrels, grey partridges and wild turkeys. Brillat was particularly excited about the latter, having seen one fly over the homestead. They bagged a number of partridges and six or seven squirrels before they chanced on a covey of turkeys: Brillat’s mouth began to water.

Then, amid the cackling hubbub “the laziest bird” flew into range. Brillat shot it: “He was handsome, fat, heavy and of a most attractive appearance.” The Irishman King, in the meantime, claimed to have shot another turkey, “but which had none the less disappeared”.

They were guided home by the Bulow girls, dressed to kill: “smocks freshly put on, new belts, pretty hats and polished shoes”. Once Brillat had recovered from his more erotic fantasy he turned his thoughts to how to cook his bag: the partridges would be served in little pastry packets, the squirrels stewed in madeira and the turkey stuffed with onions, garlic, mushrooms and anchovies.

Boston did not disappoint Brillat. For three months he lived “in a whirlpool of parties and banquets, some of which would not have been outshone by the most opulent households in Paris.” Once again the women occupied his thoughts: in a theatre box he was “driven mad by desire just looking at them.”

His other appetite was catered for by Julien, and émigré from Bordeaux where he had been cordon bleu to the radical archbishop Champion de Cicé. His restaurant ‘Julien’s Restorator’ was unique to the city. It stood on the corner of Milk and Congress Streets from 1794 to 1824. Brillat gave him the family recipe for fondue, which was an instant success, and as a result, Julien gave him the hindparts of a deer.

Brillat's sexual frustration was solved by the adoption of a mistress around this time, about whom we know next to nothing. Despite this gratification, however, he remained wedded to the idea of a return to France providing he could see his name removed from the list of émigrés anathema to the Revolutionary government in France. The Consul in Boston told him there had been fresh elections in France and that it might be the moment to send a new petition. Some time before March 1796 he returned to New York, where the yellow fever epidemic had finished, but he was broke, which exacerbated his problems, not least because he could not pay his fare home. The consul lent him the money. In Paris Juliette Récamier is thought to have been pulling strings on his behalf.

Brillat returned to France via Philadelphia. A brawl broke out on board the packet boat from New York occasioned by the late arrival of a Frenchman who had delayed their departure. The forty one year old Brillat stood his ground against a superior enemy. Later he found his countryman drinking with the biggest of the Americans "in the company of a ham and a pitcher of beer a cubit in height."

Philadelphia was host to a large French exile community that clustered around Moreau de Saint-Méry's shop on the corner of Walnut and Front Streets. Here met Talleyrand, Beaumetz, the vicomte de Noailles, Volney, Omer Talon and the duc de Liancourt. None alludes to Brillat in his memoirs. It is probable he kept his head down. He did not want to prejudice his reception in Paris, where he arrived at the end of August 1796.

Brillat's American experience was different to so many of his contemporaries because he was prepared to open his eyes: to wine (or cider), women and song.

Giles MacDonogh

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New York – Intervention de Edwin Yowell

Edwin Yowell

TURKEYS AND CONNECTICUT

YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHY WE ARE EATING TURKEY IN SEPTEMBER.

THE TURKEYS THAT WE ARE EATING TODAY IN PARIS AND NEW YORK REPRESENT IMPORTANT HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LINKS BETWEEN OUR COUNTRIES.

BRILLAT WROTE, "THE TURKEY IS ONE OF THE MOST DELIGHTFUL PRESENTS WHICH THE NEW WORLD HAS MADE TO THE OLD."

BRILLAT WROTE, "ON THE FARMS OF NORTH AMERICA, (TURKEYS) ARE SUPPLIED EITHER FROM EGGS WHICH HAVE BEEN FOUND AND HATCHED OR FROM YOUNG BIRDS TRAPPED IN THE WOODS: FOR THIS REASON THEY ARE MORE NEARLY IN THEIR PRIMITIVE STATE THERE, AND STILL KEEP THEIR ORIGINAL PLUMAGE."

EARLIER, I SAID THAT BRILLAT WAS THE FIRST "FOODIST". WHILE HE CERTAINLY WROTE OF FOOD FROM A GUSTATORY PERSPECTIVE, HE ALSO ANALYZED IT FROM ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES.

ALLEN HAS CITED THE RESONANCE BETWEEN SEVERAL OF THE APHORISMS AND A PASSAGE FROM OUR OWN DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, WRITTEN BY ANOTHER GOURMANDE, THOM JEFFERSON.

BOTH OF THESE WRITINGS ARE ROOTED IN COMMON POLITICAL BELIEFS THAT WERE THE BASIS OF THE AMERICAN AND FRENCH REVOLUTIONS. THOM JEFFERSON'S RIGHT "TO LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS" INCLUDED FOR BRILLAT THE RIGHT TO GOOD AND ENOUGH FOOD.

AND, IN HIS GREAT BOOK, BRILLAT OPINED ON THE VIRTUES OF TURKEY IN ECONOMIC TERMS. OF THE DEMAND SIDE HE WROTE:

"(TURKEY) ENJOYS THE UNIQUE ADVANTAGE OF ATTRACTING TO IT EVERY CLASS OF SOCIETY."

"WHEN THE VINE TENDERS AND THE PLOWMEN..TREAT THEMSELVES TO A PARTY..,WHAT DO YOU SEE ROASTING..? A TURKEY."

"WHEN THE..MECHANIC OR THE ARTISAN BRINGS FRIENDS TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE, WHAT IS THE TRADITIONAL MAIN DISH..? A TURKEY.."

AND

"IN EXCLUSIVE GATHERINGS..WHAT IS IT THEY WANT?' (ANYBODY WANT TO GUESS HERE?) "A..TURKEY!"

OF THE SUPPLY SIDE HE WROTE:

"THE IMPORTATION OF TURKEYS HAS MADE AN IMPORTANT ADDITION TO OUR NATIONAL WEALTH.. FARMERS CAN MORE EASILY PAY THEIR LAND RENTS BY RAISING TURKEYS.."

FOR "TOWN DWELLERS WHO WANT TO TREAT THEMSELVES TO A FEAST OF THIS OUTLANDISH MEAT MUST GIVE UP THEIR GOLD.."

WHEN BRILLAT TRAVELLED THROUGH CONNECTICUT ON HIS WAY TO BOSTON, HE WROTE THAT HE "HAD THE GOOD LUCK TO KILL A WILD TURKEY." HE WENT ON, "THIS DEED DESERVES TO GO DOWN IN HISTORY..SINCE I MYSELF AM ITS HERO."

HE WAS INVITED TO HUNT ON THE FARM OF ONE FARMER BULOW. ON ARRIVAL, HE WAS GIVEN A FARM TOUR AND OBSERVED,"I COULD DESCRIBE ALL, BUT I MUCH PREFER PICTURING" FARMER "BULOW'S FOUR FINE DAUGHTERS.."

BRILLAT MANAGED TO TAKE TIME FROM THE COMPANY OF THE FARMER'S DAUGHTERS TO HUNT. AND AFTER THE HUNT ENJOYED CHARMING COMPANY, A SPLENDID DINNER, AND GOOD CONVERSATION.

FARMER BULOW, WHO HAD SERVED UNDER LAFAYETTE DURING OUR REVOLUTION, WAXED ON THE HAPPY RESULTS OF INDEPENDENCE..HIS FARM AND HIS BOUNTIFUL LIFE.

WHILE UNDOUBTEDLY IMPRESSED WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF LIBERTY, BRILLAT WROTE , "DURING THE WHOLE OF OUR TRIP..I WAS PLUNGED IN PROFOUND THOUGHT" NOT "PONDERING THE PARTING SPEECH OF" FARMER "BULOW" BUT "CONSIDERING HOW BEST I WOULD COOK MY TURKEY."

HE ROASTED IT.

HE WROTE, "IT WAS CHARMING TO LOOK AT, FLATTERING TO THE SENSE OF SMELL, AND DELICIOUS TO THE TASTE." AND HIS DINNER GUESTS EXCLAIMED AS THE LAST MORSELS WERE GOBBLED, "VERY GOOD! EXCEEDINGLY GOOD! OH! DEAR SIR, WHAT A GLORIOUS BIT!"

AND THAT IS WHY WE DINE ON TURKEY!

Edwin Yowell