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THE TASTE OF PLACE

A CULTURAL JOURNEY INTO TERROIR

AMY B. TRUBEK

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ONE

PLACE MATTERS

A REMARKABLE CONSISTENCY EXISTS IN DISCUSSIONS OF *TERROIR* AND *GOÛT du terroir* in France, a cultural sensibility that extends back over several centuries. In historical documents, government treatises, and contemporary conversation, everyone—be they journalists, farmers, vintners, bureaucrats, chefs, or citizens—does not adopt a point of view. Instead they consider terroir and *goût du terroir* to *reflect reality*. This fundamentalist mode always begins with a defined place, tracing the taste of place back from the mouth to the plants and animals and ultimately into the soil, creating a very Gallic twist on the oft-used American phrase “location, location, location.” In France, food and drink from a certain place are thought to possess unique tastes. Thus, more than words, terroir and *goût du terroir* are *categories* that frame perceptions and practices—a worldview, or should we say a foodview? The agrarian roots of terroir best explain the origins and persistence of this foodview. Terroir and *goût du terroir* are categories for framing and explaining people’s relationship to the land, be it sensual, practical, or habitual. This connection is considered essential, as timeless as the earth itself.

Agriculturalist Olivier de Serres says in his seventeenth-century treatise *Le théâtre d’agriculture et des mesnage des champs* that “the fundamental task

in agriculture is to understand the nature of the *terroir*, whether it is the land of your ancestors or land recently acquired.”¹ Soil and roots are at the heart of French cuisine as well. In his discourse, places make unique tastes, and in turn such flavor characteristics and combinations give those places gastronomic renown. Le Grand d’Aussy, in his 1789 work *Histoire de la vie privée des français*, discusses French cuisine as the natural fruition of provincial agriculture, tracing back at least two centuries the connection between the cuisine and what “nature has seen fit to allow each of our provinces to produce.”² *Le cours gastronomique*, first published in 1808, includes a map of France that outlines the nation’s borders and then charts the inner territory solely with agricultural products. Included are the wines of regions such as Bordeaux and the Rhone; Roquefort and Brie are named, with drawings of cheeses; and many charcuterie items such as sausages and cured hams are shown as well. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s *La physiologie du goût* (The physiology of taste), first published in 1826, is a catholic exploration of the physiology and culture of taste, replete with scientific, literary, political, and economic commentaries celebrating taste. He characterizes the ability to discern the natural origins of tastes as a “point of perfection”: “[The] *gourmands* of Rome distinguished, by taste alone, the fish caught between the bridges from that which had been caught lower down. . . . And have we not plenty of *gourmands* who are able to indicate the latitude under which a wine has ripened, as certainly as a pupil of Biot or Arago can foretell an eclipse?” (emphasis mine). During the same period, Madame Adanson, in her influential and widely distributed book *La cuisinière de la campagne et de la ville*, lists cheeses by place name—Neuchâtel, Brie, Marolles, Cantal—and specifies the flavor characteristics and methods of proper storage of each. The flavor of the *fromage des Vosges*, Adanson writes, “is unique among all cheeses; the method of fabrication is a secret of the locality.”³ In these analyses, the physical environment (soil, weather, topography), not the tiller of the soil,

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

FIGURE 1. Gastronomic map of France, 1830s. From
Horace Raison, *Le Code Culinaire*. COURTESY OF
BARBARA K. WHEATON.

the shepherd, or the vintner, is the primary source of the distinctive tastes of French wine and cheese.

CREATING THEIR OWN DESTINY

A closer examination of historical events tells a different story. The natural environment *influences* the flavors of food and beverages, but ultimately the cultural domain, the foodview, creates the *goût du terroir*. The taste of place does not originate with the Mesozoic-era collision of the African and Euro-

pean continental plates that defined France's geography and geology. Rather, beginning in the early twentieth century a group of people began to organize around this naturalized interpretation of taste, for they saw the potential benefits of a foodview celebrating an agrarian and rural way of life. French *tastemakers*—journalists, cookbook writers, chefs—and *taste producers*—cheese makers, winemakers, bakers, cooks—effectively shaped how people tasted wine and food. The French terms used to describe those dedicated to food are *gastronomes*, tastemakers, and *les artisans des métiers de bouche*, taste producers; both are highly specific terms that more fully evoke the attention the French pay to food and drink than can be captured in an English translation. These advocates intervened into an everyday occurrence, eating and drinking, and guided the French toward a certain relationship between place and taste.

These tastemakers and taste producers worked hard to shape French judgments of the morsels and liquids that they put in their mouths. These artisans, critics, and commentators elaborated a new language of taste. This language was never purely aesthetic, however, but instead these new translations of taste were part of a dialogue with nature, in this case the agrarian countryside of France. And this was not merely a fanciful dialogue, the sort of raucous food talk that can happen at dinner parties and local cafés and then is all but forgotten the next morning. Nor was this new language merely another version of the utopian food visions characterized by the legend of the medieval Land of Cockaigne, where “cooked food—patés, meat pies, cakes, white bread—grows on trees.”⁴ This grammar and syntax was built one ingredient at a time, from the ground to the table.

These men and women observed their world and decided to champion certain practices (small farms, regional dishes) and values (tradition, local taste) in order to make sure that they did not disappear. Their cultural and economic investments made the French word for *soil* signify so much: a sensibility, a mode of discernment, a philosophy of practice, and an analytic

category. What they *said* may have embraced the timeless and essential notion of mother Earth, but what they *did* was to create a vision of agrarian rural France and convincingly put it in people's mouths. These tastemakers and taste producers cared about taste and place and did not want traditional ways of growing, eating, and drinking to be lost. They made arguments linking place, taste, types of agriculture, and quality that helped protect certain forms of agricultural production and enabled France's modern regional cuisines. These discussions helped shape taste perceptions beyond France as well, for their claims about the taste of place have been adopted throughout the world. The question thus is how did a definition of terroir extending beyond an instrumental explanation of the soil to a more complex category emerge?

Terroir has been used to explain agriculture for centuries, but its association with taste, place, and quality is more recent, a reaction to changing markets, the changing organization of farming, and changing politics. By the late nineteenth century, everyday rural agricultural practices—a reliance on certain crops or livestock because they responded to the local climate and geography, harvesting the bounty of nearby rivers and seas—came to represent the building blocks of regional cuisines. A new connection emerged between how the French farmed, lived, and supped. Some historians examining the emergence of a unified interest in championing the relevance of terroir to French food and farming see geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache, who lived from 1845 to 1909, as a seminal figure.⁵ He published his best-known work, *Tableau de la géographie de France*, in 1903, and it has been in print ever since. Geography was in its infancy at the time, and the main influences on the field were ecology, evolution, and nationalism. Trained in history and literature, Vidal de la Blache spent most of his career involved in the field of geography, and at the end of his career he obtained a position as professor of geography at the University of Paris. Perhaps because of his initial training in history, he was interested in the human and social

dimensions of geography, and he became deeply involved in developing a regional geography. In doing so, he sought to understand the interaction between humans and their environment, emphasizing the *genre de vie*, or cultural dimensions.

In his introduction, Vidal de la Blache states, “What one hopes to explain in these pages concerns how can the history of a people be (or must be) incorporated in the soil of France? The rapport between the soil and the people is imprinted with an ancient character that continues through today.” This essentialist argument, so powerful in early anthropology, geography, and other disciplines, can be interpreted negatively for its nationalistic and racist underpinnings that helped to justify oppressive and regressive policies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the case of food and drink, however, this book, with its focus on the specific and unique geographical conditions of different regions of France, served a different purpose by becoming an important cornerstone of attempts to affirm regionally based agriculture and cuisine.

Underlying Vidal de la Blache’s analysis is the assumption that “environment determines the way of life [*genre de vie*], that is, the enduring features of existence in any particular locality.”⁶ His book examines the geography of France region by region, focusing on the underlying geologic structures but also celebrating differences in regional character, including food and drink, along the way. Jean-Yves Guiomar sees Vidal de la Blache as a naturalist and romantic: “For Vidal, the characteristics of a way of life include the manner in which people situated themselves in a particular location, the type of dwelling they chose, and the design of their homes, all interpreted as a direct reflection of the nature of the soil.”⁷ He created a timeless and essentialist portrait of the relationship of people to the land, affirming the already powerful cultural belief in the importance of the *pays* and *paysans* by focusing on the impact of geology (biological and physical) on regional economic and cultural life. Vidal de la Blache was also supported by the French state to create good maps of all

the regions of France. This project, sponsored by the Minister of Public Education, Jules Simon, resulted in the Cartes Murales, larger maps of France and its regions that were distributed to schools throughout France.

Vidal de la Blache's scientific treatise did not directly address the economies of the regions. However, taste producers and tastemakers of the same period translated his geographic analyses into daily practices. The agrarian activism of the *vignerons* of Champagne, the AOC regulations and the regional movements of the early twentieth century, and the atlases and guides of Curnonsky were all influenced by his work. They used the timelessness of Vidal de la Blache's *genre de vie* and made it central to their argument for protection and preservation. Exploring their efforts explains the emergence of *goût du terroir* as a French cultural category.

TASTE, TERROIR, AND THE FRENCH STATE

Grapes for wine historically have been one of France's largest agricultural products, and apparently *vignerons* were the first group of taste producers to realize the possibilities inherent in promoting the link between place and quality; they were the first to take this foodview and use it to their economic advantage. The 1855 Bordeaux wine classifications are considered the first attempt by those involved in wine production and sales to promote the quality of wines by their place of origin. They were developed internally by those involved in the Bordeaux wine industry, particularly wine brokers, to be used at the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris. These classifications, however, were not monitored by the French state. The use of ideas about place to make arguments about quality became increasingly important in the late nineteenth century, and it became part of a serious sociopolitical movement to protect French agricultural products in the early twentieth century, culminating with the founding of the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine in the 1930s and laws that supported the idea of *appellations d'origine contrôlées*.

Historian Kolleen Guy elegantly documents the initial efforts to create state-sanctioned and -supported controlled delimitations, establishing that terroir and the system of controlled appellations have a particularly French genealogy, beginning with champagne. By the belle époque era, champagne was an international commodity that symbolized France and Frenchness to elites around the globe, and the connection between commodity and nation was instrumental in initial justifications for the protection of champagne by the French state.

Guy's work, focusing on the period between 1890 and 1914, concerns both competing and allied interests of *vignerons* and *négociants* in the Champagne region at the turn of the century. Even at that time champagne was a beverage endowed with symbolic power and cultural capital. Historically, sparkling wines were an unintended product, the result of carbonic gas emerging from a secondary fermentation of yeasts. Many wines are capable of "sparkling," but champagne producers began to realize the upmarket potential of their sparkling beverage and worked hard to promote its distinctiveness. This was done with the creation of aristocratic genealogies and myths of patrimony, linking the drink, the place, and the producers to a storied past. Guy argues that by the belle époque, to drink champagne was to stake your claim to the civilized life. Champagne became a national brand in an international market, a commodity with tremendous symbolic and cultural capital. But who was reaping the rich rewards of the allure of champagne? As the eloquent *vigneron* René Lamarre states in the beginning of his editorial "Where Industry Meets Terroir," "I cannot repeat it enough: with the way that [wine] lists are drawn up today, within ten years people will no longer be acquainted with the name Champagne but with those of Roederer, Planckaert, Bollinger and it will not matter from which [grapes] these wines are produced."⁸

The elevated status of champagne among the international bourgeoisie in fact did little to contribute to the livelihoods of the laborers in the fields and much to threaten their identity. The local response was to turn to terroir,

to fight for champagne as a product of the soil rather than a placeless pretty label. The *vignerons* wanted to retain some proprietary rights to the name champagne, now used all over the globe, so they turned to the soil. The agrarian roots of the movement to create protection for place and products situate the history of terroir. The need to valorize the soils and grapes was particularly acute for growers in this region, since champagne is a blended wine, and large family estates dominated as *négociants*, responsible for crushing, blending, aging, and marketing the wines. Grapes and soil were the growers' only means of controlling the appropriation of champagne. A series of events, especially the phylloxera epidemic of the 1860s, which threatened *vignerons* and *négociants* alike, helped legitimate the idea that Champagne as a defined region was fundamental to the identity of champagne as a beverage, nationally or internationally.

As the link between taste and place evolved in the early twentieth century, taste producers, particularly the *vignerons*, involved the French state, arguing that legal and political means were needed to protect unique French products from international competition. They succeeded. The *vignerons* of the Champagne region were the first to use the legal system to create delimitations on production related to locale. The fundamental goal of the first law (initially passed in 1905, and then amended in 1908) was to protect against fraud; those who "falsely attributed the location of origin of the merchandise as a way to sell their goods" could be punished by law.⁹ This legal decree, however, did not deal with what made certain locations unique. By 1908 the law was made more specific, stating that a delimitation could concern a wine that had an association with a region that was "local, loyal, and constant,"¹⁰ and Champagne was granted that status of "the first recognized regional delimitation."¹¹ Certain areas were judged to be in the "Champagne region," and only wines produced in those areas could be sold with the "Champagne" label. This was the beginning of a system that protected and promoted French wine and would ultimately be extended to cheese and other products.

This initial attempt to define legal boundaries for the production of wine, however, did not take into account notions of quality; no specific parameters were established for how wine was made, nor how much could be produced and sold in the marketplace. Thus one chronic problem for winemakers, overproduction and the resulting price depression, was not addressed. As a result, a series of protests was staged against initial government efforts to protect the wine industry. During the Champagne revolt of 1911, for example, many complained that the decisions about where the boundaries should be drawn for different wines, including Champagne, were politically manipulated.

Joseph Capus, a trained agronomist who worked on grapes and wine, was an instrumental figure in the development of the initial laws promoting delimitations and the subsequent refinements that led to the 1935 law creating the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO).¹² A professor in the Gironde region, home to many vineyards, he eventually became the commissioner of agriculture there, and then finally the president of the INAO from its inception until his death in 1947. At the end of his life he wrote a report explaining the evolution of the *appellations d'origine contrôlées*. The main flaw of the early legislation, he felt, was that it concerned only provenance. Only in the revised legislation, first in 1919 and then in 1935, do “uniqueness” and “quality” come into play as important parameters.¹³ Capus outlines the barriers to creating a law that can adequately capture the true nature of the taste of place, saying that in the thirty-year period between the first and last law, an ongoing struggle occurred between the “theorists” and the “realists.” The theorists, he argues, had the upper hand in the 1905 and 1919 versions of the law, and “the legislature considered place solely as a jurisdiction. They did not want to see the human dimension, or the technical dimension.”¹⁴ In order to create a powerful link between wine and place, the guarantees must extend past place of origin to include “guarantees of authenticity as well.”¹⁵ He expands on this notion, saying, “It is not

sufficient simply to guarantee the product's authenticity, but also to assure the *quality* insofar as it can be measured by soil and grape variety."¹⁶ By 1935 terroir no longer functioned primarily descriptively, but it now also determined quality and authenticity.

In 1930 Capus became a member of the French senate, representing the Gironde, and he became a primary author of the legislation that finally linked taste, place, and quality, legislation that far surpassed previous regulations that focused on provenance. The 1935 law created a new regulatory agency within the French Ministry of Agriculture, an agency that would oversee all aspects of determining, monitoring, and promoting wines awarded the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée designation. This was a first in French agricultural history: "Viticulture understood [before any others] the importance of collective organization in order to understand specific aspects of production, to research, maintain and promote quality, and also to protect and promote these products to consumers."¹⁷ No other collective of producers came up with a similar integrated endeavor for some time, although the AOC system ultimately came to include cheese as well. In 1990 a new law was passed to give the opportunity for AOC status to any agricultural product, and so there are now AOC olive oils, lentils, and potatoes, to name just a few foods.

The Institut National des Appellations d'Origine has been part of the French Ministry of Agriculture since its inception. Despite the activist legacy behind its creation, the direct result of the organizing efforts of vintners and others, the institute's goal is to "protect terroir." As the official literature states:

It has been known from ancient times that certain lands are made more suitable to the creation of products that retain, and in fact draw out, the specific flavors of that place.

Due to this phenomenon, at the beginning of the century the idea was born to create the notion of the *appellation d'origine*, to acknowledge and protect it under the rubric of the Appellation d'origine contrôlée.¹⁸

Further on, the link between taste and place is elaborated: “The INAO was initially charged to *identify* wines and eaux de vie, to *codify* their usage for protection in France and abroad against all encroachments” (emphasis mine). Awarding a wine or cheese or any other food product the status of Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée put the official stamp on the connection between taste, locale, and quality.

Rural sociologist Elizabeth Barham analyzes the French AOC system and the link to terroir as an example of Karl Polanyi’s theory of economic embeddedness, which argues that markets have always operated within environmental and social constraints. She sees label of origin systems as an example of “translating” nature by focusing on the production process, and she examines how this translation system becomes socially legitimized and reinforced. As she points out, “The legitimation process, to be effective, must be carried out not only within the territory of production but nested within multiple levels of coordination from the local to the global.”¹⁹ She goes on to argue that terroir (which she says is a cultural concept) is used to create the legitimation for these place-based products. At another point she says that “what there is in nature to be known” is the basis of the AOC system, “rather than viewing nature as an obstacle to be overcome or controlled for production.”²⁰

From its very inception, the AOC system has rewarded the alliance of producers. The ability to get AOC status for a certain wine or cheese, or now an olive oil or another product, has always been based on a collective process. Individuals or corporations may not submit an application for AOC status. Instead, a group of producers must submit a dossier of required information, which goes first to a regional committee of the Institut National des Appellations d’Origine and then, if approved, to a national committee. The national committee then appoints a review committee that includes professionals from the submitting region, and this committee ultimately makes a recommendation to the national body. If the producers’ dossier is

accepted, the Ministry of Agriculture then fixes the boundaries of the appellation and makes it into law. As Barham points out, this process, which starts locally, is codified nationally, and also has implications for global markets: “The new appellation is now protected as the collective property of the producers, as well as part of the agricultural, gastronomic and cultural heritage of France.”²¹ Because of the complex framework of environment, agriculture, and tradition that ultimately defines terroir, many technical consultants must be involved in order to both operate and monitor the AOC system. Geologists, soil scientists, plant scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians all get involved. In addition, tasting panels are organized for all proposed AOC foods and wines to determine their *typicité*, or shared sensory dimensions, and these tasters can have a say in the final specifications for the product. One cannot overemphasize the importance of terroir in every step of the process of obtaining legitimation for place-specific foods and drinks in France. In one study involving INAO agents, those who oversee the processes of both getting AOC status and maintaining it, terroir was selected as the most important concept used in their everyday work.²²

In an explanation of the Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée system and the management of terroir, the INAO states that the AOC system provides the tools growing regions can use to fully take advantage of their resources: “With the extraction of the specifics [or characteristics] of their *terroir*, and the search to value and protect the agricultural possibilities in a geographic zone, AOC products can be genuine instruments for managing and supporting territory.” But the consumer also needs to be involved in order for the system to work. Whereas “standardization leads to delocalization . . . [the AOC system] supposes that the consumer takes the initiative, recognizes the superiority of a strongly identified product and agrees to pay the price.”²³ The INAO therefore oversees how food and wine is made locally,

but it also encourages the consumer to find and appreciate those items. The award of AOC status provides producers in the growing region with the economic, political, technical, and marketing support of a government agency. And as Barham points out, the process of obtaining AOC status is heavily subsidized by the French government.²⁴ From the point of view of the INAO, places create distinct tastes. The mission of the institute, which uses an essentializing definition of terroir, is to be a steward of the relationship between locale and flavor, and to encourage everyone to agree that they can taste place.

With the AOC laws and the founding of the INAO, in effect, a sensibility, or a foodview, became the rationale for laws and government policy that shaped people's approach to growing food and wine for the entire twentieth century through today. Now part of the Code de la Consommation, the rules and regulations of the AOC system *guarantee* the possibility of local control, thus keeping the knowledge and the power in the hands of the growers, the vintners, and others in each agricultural region. As one legal scholar puts it, the "effects of the AOC system are both *célébré* and *célèbre* in France, that is 'celebrated' in the sense of 'famous' and in the sense of 'revered.'"²⁵ He also points out that the AOC laws protect *both* the natural and human elements involved in the creation of these distinctive foods and wines, and give farmers "claims of entitlement" and government support far beyond anything available in the United States.²⁶ The implementation of the AOC system guaranteed that food and wine in France could, and would, stay connected to place. When discussing the French preoccupation with memory, identity, and heritage across many cultural arenas—including cuisine, but also museums and heritage sites—several social scientists concluded that "it could be argued that *appellation contrôlée* is a notion that has spread to the whole fabric of France."²⁷ Fixing practices to a certain time and place, and then creating value for these practices, they argue, is now a larger cultural undertaking.

THE GASTRONOMY OF PLACE

During the same era that *paysans* and others hoped to define the taste of place, gastronomes like Curnonsky and his colleagues prodded the French to go out and taste the countryside, to experience the unique regional *saveurs* (tastes) firsthand. Before the French Revolution, French cuisine was organized primarily by social status: high and low. In a pattern reflective of all of Western Europe, the wealthy were able to command ingredients from near and far, whereas rural peasants and urban laborers were confined to locally available foods.²⁸ The cuisine of the courts, where conspicuous consumption helped prove the power of the rulers, set the tone for luxurious food. French haute cuisine thus rested on the principles of complexity and scarcity. Dishes were time-consuming to prepare, and many of the ingredients were hard to procure and expensive. *Le Viandier*, a cookbook written by Guillaume Tirel, a royal cook in the fourteenth century who worked in the courtly kitchen of Charles V, includes a recipe for a swan that has been skinned and roasted before the skin is put back on the cooked bird. The roasted and dressed swan is then decorated and put on a platter to bring to the royal table. Tirel also uses gold and silver leaf to garnish many dishes.

Antonin Carême, born in 1784, is famous for his dedication to combining the use of costly and rare ingredients with spectacularly complex preparations in his quest to prove that cooking was an art. His cookbooks, such as *Le pâtissier royal parisien*, contain drawings, directives, and some recipes, but nary a one would fit the “dinner in sixty minutes or less” bill we contemporary users like to find. The hard-to-procure spices of the Middle Ages have been replaced with caviar and truffles. And the creation of each dish is an exercise in aesthetic refinement: “Almost every recipe involves the use of sieve and cheesecloth, straining, extracting, concentrating, reducing.”²⁹ The desired result was almost always a monumental structure, a three-dimensional edifice representing mastery and majesty. By the late nineteenth century

swans had disappeared, but in their place were dishes such as *saumon à la Humbert 1er*, celebrating the Italian ruler with a poached and bejeweled fish on a pedestal with a crown made of kohlrabi and garnished with crayfish.

On the other hand, from the Middle Ages through the French Revolution, most of the French were still involved in a subsistence style of cooking. For most, cereals comprised the bulk of their diet well into the nineteenth century: “in some regions galettes (a kind of pancake made of coarse grains like rye); or starchy slops like oaten porridge; or barley, chestnut, or buckwheat gruel reinforced in spring and summer by vegetables such as cabbage, beans, onions.”³⁰ A soup in medieval France was most often a large piece of stale bread in the bottom of a bowl with broth and a few vegetables poured on top. Famine was constantly perceived as a danger for the majority of the French population during this period: “Much depended on where one lived, but cereals were ubiquitously considered the staple diet, and a hunger was popularly identified with their insufficiency.”³¹

During the nineteenth century, two other culinary approaches emerged in France, one related to class (*cuisine bourgeoise*) and the other to location (*cuisine régionale*). *Cuisine bourgeoise* assimilated aspects of haute cuisine, particularly the techniques and basic principles of what makes a meal, but with a greater focus on expediency and sustenance. It was considered the provenance of middle-class women and their female domestic servants living in French towns and cities. *Cuisine régionale* subsumed traditional peasant fare, taking the agricultural variations of different French regions and then elevating the traditional notion of “making do with what was on hand” to a uniquely important way to cook, one that represented the best of France as an agrarian nation. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson argues that models of cuisine should be understood as “the possibilities of practice.” What happens on the ground refers to these models, but slippage is constant and boundaries and definitions are in fact fluid and often under negotiation. She says that “*peasant cuisine* is less constrained by the social class of its

practitioners than by the context of that practice. . . . Peasant cuisine is the ultimate traditional cuisine defined by place, and regional cuisine is not far behind.”³²

The codification of *cuisine bourgeoise* and *cuisine régionale* was very much a response to the increased urbanization and industrialization of society, and truly a product of the epoch. Beyond the organization of agriculture, the written word—cookbooks, food journalism, and regional food guides—was instrumental in developing French regional gastronomy and celebrating the taste of place. Madame Pampille says in her charming book *Les bons plats de France: Cuisine régionale*, first published in 1913, “Only in France do you find good game,” and goes on to assert, “And don’t talk to me about the German and Hungarian hares that have infested the markets over the past few years: these are large hares, stupid and without flavor.”³³ In the “National Dishes” chapter, her dictums on the quality of game—that it needs to come from France and be raised in certain environments—disclose an emerging vocabulary and grammar of taste. She describes partridges grown in confined spaces and fed rapeseed as “having a taste that is faded and dim,” whereas the wild or free partridges roaming the plains, which feel hunger and thirst, have another taste entirely.³⁴

This book is full of recipes, certainly, but perhaps it should also be considered a gastronomical treatise, a new physiology of taste in the manner of Brillat-Savarin, whose *La physiologie du goût* has not been out of print since it was first published in 1810. Here, quality of flavor is linked to where the partridges come from and how they were fed. And writing of the glory and splendor of France and French cuisine alone is not sufficient for Pampille; distinct geographic regions also provide specific taste experiences. The Savoie and Dauphiné are lauded for their river trout, whose delicate flesh can be appreciated only when you eat it there. She has even stronger views about bouillabaisse: “The triumph of Marseille, it is only good when eaten in Marseille. Don’t try to eat it in Paris.”³⁵ Place matters.

THE CASE OF CURNONSKY

Curnonsky was an instrumental figure in the development of regional gastronomy, publishing inventories of regional dishes and guidebooks of stores and restaurants highlighting regional cuisine. The “Prince of Gastronomes,” Curnonsky, born Maurice-Edmond Sailland in 1872, was the author of numerous books on food and gastronomy in France, publishing in every decade of the twentieth century until he died in 1956. His life and career spanned a period that witnessed great changes in French cuisine and gastronomy, and he helped make them. Curnonsky linked the physiology of taste to the particularity of place, taking the everyday practices of locals in various regions of France and creating encyclopedias, guides, and atlases that enabled this local knowledge to become nationally and internationally celebrated.

Early in his career Curnonsky made his living as a journalist, a critic, and a ghostwriter for many books (he collaborated with Colette on quite a few). He was always a *bon vivant*, a larger-than-life figure in bohemian Parisian circles. It was inevitable that he became part of the long French tradition of gastronomes, dedicated men of leisure commenting on (and participating in) the form and content of French food and wine, beginning with Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and Alexandre Grimod de la Reynière in the early nineteenth century.

Curnonsky (he changed his name as a young man, perhaps inspired by his youthful fascination with Russia) turned almost exclusively to gastronomic writing after World War I. He was at times employed by various organizations, state agencies, and businesses whose goal was to promote automobile tourism. This led him to many years of exploring the French countryside and exhorting the French people to get out and enjoy the gastronomic bounty of rural France. Even though many of his books aimed to get the urban French out of the cities, his philosophy was based on rural

preservation rather than rural development. For Curnonsky, the French countryside possessed many gastronomic treasures, and he wanted to make sure that they were not lost or ignored as France moved further into the twentieth century, a century that embraced all manner of technologies in the name of progress.

Curnonsky loved all of France's culinary bounty. He called France "the gastronomic paradise of the universe," and he took great care to describe the different styles of cooking contained within its borders. He asserted there were four major cooking styles. Haute cuisine, the domain of chefs, could be found in premier restaurants; *cuisine bourgeoise*, or French family cooking, strove to retain the "total taste of things as they are"; regional cooking contained all the ingredients and dishes that were based on local practices; and, finally, there was "impromptu cooking, or making do on a potluck basis."³⁶

Included in his more than fifty works are *La France gastronomique* (with Marcel Rouff), published in the 1920s; *Le trésor gastronomique*, an inventory of regional dishes written with Austin de Croze in 1933; *Eloge de Brillat-Savarin*, published in 1931; and *Bon plats, bons vins*, published in 1950. In *Recettes de provinces de France* he says, "This work celebrates, in a very artistic fashion, the alliance between tourism and gastronomy I have promoted for fifty years and which is only possible in France, because this is a land of tremendous diversity."³⁷

Curnonsky lived during a period when many in France, from those representing small chambers of commerce to members of corporations, became very interested in the development of rural tourism, in part as a result of the growth of urban areas and an expanding bourgeoisie. Curnonsky, along with his colleagues Austin de Croze and Marcel Rouff, helped develop regional gastronomy partially to support car and rail travel to the French countryside. Between 1910 and 1930 a gastronomic literature emerged that extols the various regions of France, declaring them part of the glory of the

French nation. Some of these publications were initially part of a larger set of marketing initiatives by Michelin, the tire company, which was interested in developing ways to get people to use their cars to journey into the countryside for leisure.³⁸ These are the earliest versions of what became the red Michelin guides, the reference works on dining and lodging throughout France that became powerful arbiters of taste for tourists, French or foreign. The Michelin guides, with their rules of exclusion and inclusion, and their expectations about what made a restaurant great, helped to create an elite cadre of restaurants throughout France that ultimately reinforced a national haute cuisine. In a book of reminiscences, *Curnonsky et ses amis*, published in 1979, Joseph Rameaux commented that Curnonsky preferred female home cooks, “the real cordon bleus,” to male chefs. According to Rameaux, he felt that elite chefs too often “ignored the [culinary] rules that had reigned in our *appellations*.”³⁹

Curnonsky’s goals were quite different than those of the red Michelin guides: he wanted to educate cooks, chefs, and diners about the riches of the regions. In *Le trésor gastronomique de France*, Curnonsky and his collaborator Austin de Croze created a regional repertory. Curnonsky boasts that “this thick book doesn’t contain a single recipe. It is simply a complete list of the dishes and wines of France. . . . It contains 380 pages!”⁴⁰ This was a book for professionals: Curnonsky and de Croze wanted chefs, restaurateurs, and hoteliers throughout France to have an inventory of regional ingredients and dishes to give them ideas for their menus. The book starts with Alsace and visits all the French provinces. Each chapter starts with a map and then a two-page description of the landscape, the history of the region, and a brief description of the regional cuisine. Then there are lists: fish, meat, vegetables, typical menus.

His books are notable for their breadth, with lists of hundreds of recipes or regional dishes or restaurants. Depth, on the other hand, is another matter. You never hear the experiences and stories of the people responsible for

these recipes, restaurants, or dishes, nor their histories. In his writings the taste of place is made timeless.

For Curnonsky and his contemporaries to convince people to leave the cafés and bistros of Paris, Lyon, and Marseille, they needed to create a destination and have a celebration in mind. What could be better than wonderful food and wine? Another gastronome of the period, Edmond Richardin, devotes the introduction of his book *L'art du bien manger* to a “gourmet geography of the regions of France.” In what is essentially a prose poem that starts in Flanders and ends in Béarn, Richardin lists the gastronomic wonders of France, region by region: “the andouillettes of Cambrai, the trout of Dunkerque, the triumphant asparagus of Argenteuil, [and] onward to Brittany . . . with its Cancale oysters, lobsters and langoustines of Roscoff.” In Bresse, Bugey, and the land of Gex: “poulardes de Bresse, Belley sausages, Feillens apples, the cheese of Passin, a rival to the best Gruyère, and the blue cheese of Gex.”⁴¹ He ends by exhorting gourmets to open their minds to the vast gastronomic possibilities of the French provinces.

These previously humble ingredients and dishes, the results of many combined efforts of “making do,” became immortal. Thanks to the efforts of gourmands such as Curnonsky, de Croze, Richardin, and others, Camembert cheese, Argenteuil asparagus, and *poulardes de Bresse* became celebrity foods. Ingredients and dishes came to represent their regions, ultimately guaranteeing their permanence, for they came to signify more than a dish using the locally available ingredients (bouillabaisse in and around Marseille, cassoulet in and around Carcassonne), but also to represent the taste of that place, wherever the dish may be consumed. Madame Pampille’s admonition to only eat bouillabaisse in Marseille notwithstanding, bouillabaisse, for example, became the iconic dish of the French Mediterranean the world over. In the spirit of Proust’s madeleine, these ingredients and dishes became iconographic, the *lieux de mémoire* of certain places, their tastes symbolizing France’s rich and diverse geography.

Curnonsky, Austin de Croze, and their compatriots also worked with the French state in their efforts to preserve regional gastronomy. If one looks carefully at *Le trésor gastronomique*, reading not just the list of regional dishes, the *choucroute aux escargots* and the *bouillabaisse*, but the preface and introduction as well, the calculation of their efforts becomes obvious. Here, de Croze's position is stated to be "president of the French Office of Gastronomy," and under the auspices of his official position he convened a meeting on "the general state of gastronomy." After doing a survey of all the available gastronomic publications, the participants decided there was one major lacuna: "an *impartial* and *complete* repertory of all the regional foods and dishes of France" (emphasis in the original).⁴² *Le trésor gastronomique* will thus be extremely useful, they claimed, for "ministers of agriculture, commerce, fisheries, and public works, as well as tourist organizations, chambers of commerce, trade unions, business interests [related to food and drink], and, finally, gastronomes and tourists." *Le trésor gastronomique*, like the AOC system, was a culinary intervention, for those involved felt that "France resembles a bit those beautiful women who are simply too modest and don't take compliments seriously, content to simply be pretty. . . . We must jealously guard our riches."⁴³

A newer version of this style of culinary inventory, started in the 1980s, is *L'Inventaire du patrimoine culinaire de la France*, sponsored by an inter-ministerial organization, the Centre National des Arts Culinaires, a joint effort of the ministries of culture, agriculture, health, national education, and tourism. In many ways similar to Curnonsky's *Le trésor gastronomique*, this collection of books, one for each of the twenty-two *départements* of France, goes into more detail about each *produit du terroir*, providing contact information and recipes representative of each region. Anthropologist Marion Demoissier sees this newer incarnation of the regional inventory to be "the result of a conscious state policy aimed at both the protection and the promotion of a rural cultural heritage."⁴⁴ Curnonsky and de Croze wanted to

get the new urbanites back out into the countryside. Now, with the majority of the French living in the cities, the goal is to get them to remember the countryside.

THE PLACE OF THE PAYSAN

The attention placed upon regional cuisines may have been particularly strong in France because agriculture remained a large sector of the economy well into the twentieth century. Early in the twentieth century, Jean Fulbert-Dumonteil, journalist and native of the Périgord region, wrote, “The Alps and the Pyrenees, the Landes, Cevennes, Auvergne, and the Jura send us small goat cheeses which have a marvelous flavor. The Limousin, Poitou, Bourbonnais, and Berry create sheep cheeses with a fine *savoir*.”⁴⁵ Only the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy in the 1960s, which pushed for a unified European approach to farming that promoted larger and more industrialized farming, forced changes in France’s farming practices. Nevertheless, in many regions agriculture remained small in scale and traditional in practice. Rural areas in the west, south, and east of the country remained populated by small farmers producing diverse agricultural products throughout the twentieth century.

France is intensely cultivated. Usable agricultural land still covers 60 percent, or thirty-three million hectares, of France, and of that number thirty million hectares continue to be utilized for farming.⁴⁶ As in many other industrialized nations, there have been significant changes in agricultural regions over the past 150 years, including significant rural migration to urban areas: the rural population of France declined almost 50 percent between 1851 and 1982, with only 4 percent of the total working population involved in farming by 1997. However, over the same period many farming practices remained remarkably resilient: although the tiny farms, or *minifundia*, largely disappeared—subsistence laborers were better off in town—the midsize

family farm actually increased. In 1929 the number of farms between five and fifty hectares was 42 percent of the total, but by 1955 that figure was at 60 percent and, of most note, remained at 60 percent until 1983. France continues to be the largest agricultural nation in the European Union, with “23 percent of the total agricultural area of the fifteen EU states.”⁴⁷

The small family-owned farm is not simply part of the mythic past, but remains vital to France’s economy and landscape. Even if the majority of the French do not farm today, they still retain connections to farms and farming communities, and the French countryside still appears to be comprised of many small, diverse farms. Only the north-central region of France (around Paris), where primarily grains and sugar beets are grown, is engaged in the large-scale and corporate agriculture that characterizes farming in most of the United States. The agrarian view still dominates.

Thus, the nation’s geography has long been described as a combination of urban and rural, and little attention is paid to uncultivated lands.⁴⁸ People’s connection to the landscape has remained through farms and farmers, to the point that many observers have noted the “mythic” qualities of the countryside and peasantry in the French imagination, even as the majority of the population has left both behind in their own lives.⁴⁹

Deborah Reed-Danahy and Susan Carol Rogers, pioneering American anthropologists working in France, noted twenty years ago that certain features of French society were strikingly different than those of the United States, including “the French preoccupation with history and traditions, and the importance of rural life in French thought.”⁵⁰ Rogers explores the role of the peasant in French culture, arguing that the peasant, or *le paysan*, functions as an important symbolic category. The peasant, like food, is “good to think.” The idea of the peasant—the small farmer embedded in rural areas and upholding the French agrarian legacy—often serves as a lightning rod in contemporary debates about what makes France unique and the French people remarkable. As Rogers points out, France has “two often conflicting

views of itself. On one hand, France is a highly centralized, modern civilization with a strong sense of national identity. . . . On the other hand, its identity is tied to a long history of deeply rooted traditions, many anchored in French soil.”⁵¹ The imagined peasant thus speaks to the benefits of national progress or the pain and loss of cultural change.

French historian James Lehning takes up Rogers’s exegesis of the French peasant. He sees the domination of what he terms a “metanarrative” in histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This metanarrative tells a story of the absorption of the French peasant and regional rural practices and lifestyles into the more powerful homogenizing impulses of the French state.⁵² Narrative plots rely on a sense of comedy (the savage peasant tamed) or tragedy (rural culture destroyed).⁵³ He sees the French interest in the rural landscape as a “metaphor for the culture of the countryside, a space on which individuals make meaning as they live their lives.” The power of *le paysan* and *le pays* to readings of the French landscape continues from Vidal de la Blache to contemporary French geographers. As contemporary French geographer Armand Fremont says, “No other major civilization in Europe or elsewhere has ever valued the soil more than the French or associated it more intimately with the good.” He argues that, historically, France is but one of the great “peasant civilizations,” yet in the contemporary period, when farmers are called *agriculteurs* rather than *paysans*, there remains a cultural, even mythic, preoccupation with, as he eloquently describes it, “the living portion of the earth’s husk.”⁵⁴ Fremont feels that “soil is a focus of all France’s thoughts and emotions.”⁵⁵ A foodview associating taste, soil, and the bounty of the earth has a long history.

The French foodview linking taste and place has been tremendously consistent over the past century, in effect preserving agrarian values and practices now often considered quaint and old-fashioned. Today the INAO’s mission could be seen as the preservation of a philosophy of agriculture from an earlier era, before the advent of large-scale production, national

and international distribution systems, and global consumption patterns. In France, the AOC system, with its emphasis on artisan methods and locale-specific production, evokes the best of agrarian France. The other possibilities—large-scale industrialized farming, production of food and wines solely for commodity export—are considered problematic and possibly culturally anomalous.

The state plays an important part in the continued possibility of a *goût du terroir* that remains powerful in an era of agriculture characterized by industrialization of practice and globalization of supply. Ours is a time when McDonald's are not found just on the boulevard St-Germain-des-Prés, but also in rural Cavaillon in southwest France, and the European Union wants to regulate the size of duck cages used for holding ducks raised for foie gras to appease animal rights activists in Britain. French farmers, historically well organized and culturally powerful, protest regularly against the encroachment of regional and global market forces and regulations into their territory. In a 1999 trade dispute between the United States and the European Union, the United States decided to create a 100 percent tariff for imported European luxury goods, including Roquefort cheese and foie gras. In protest, French farmers attacked a number of McDonald's restaurants in southwest France (the region where foie gras and Roquefort are produced) with rotten apples, tomatoes, and manure. A French farmer was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "My struggle remains the same . . . the battle against globalization and for the right of people to feed themselves as they choose."⁵⁶

The cultural embrace of France's agrarian legacy and the interest in preserving it means that the taste of place often intersects with notions of authenticity. But what makes an authentic or, for that matter, timeless culinary dish? The Alsatian chapter of Curnonsky's *Le trésor gastronomique* lists four types of choucroute, a dish celebrated today as representative of Alsace and Alsatian cuisine. Many restaurant menus feature choucroute, usually

composed of two or three types of pork sausages, braised pork chops or pork shoulder, and sauerkraut. The book's longer list of choucroute dishes is mysterious and tantalizing: *choucroute Alsatienne*, *choucroute aux escargots*, *canard à la choucroute*, *choucroute à la Juive*. The first dish fits into our contemporary assumptions about choucroute, but the other three? In the seventy-five years since this inventory was published, perhaps the authors' fears have come to pass: does anyone make snail choucroute in Alsace anymore? At the same time, without inventories, guides, and atlases to document the choucroute of Alsace, would any versions still be available today, when the logic of preservation (cabbage into sauerkraut and fresh meat into sausage) that helped create this dish in the first place has been replaced with *sous vide* and *à la minute* cooking?

Taste, then, in France resides as a form of local knowledge. The success of the turn-of-the-century tastemakers and taste producers lay in their ability to create an association between place and quality. They appropriated the link between taste and place, and helped create legal and governmental mechanisms to champion location-based food and drink. Local tastes now define superior quality, which means the French are willing to pay a higher price. Burgundy wines are known to have different taste profiles than wines from Bordeaux and Languedoc, though all may be red wines. In contrast, Americans do not associate specific locales with flavor profiles in wine. Instead, they buy and taste wines according to the grape varietal, such as pinot noir or merlot. The French also perceive that goods produced locally on a smaller scale are superior. An AOC wine produced from a single vineyard in Bordeaux is considered better than a blended wine brought in from all over the Languedoc. Wine producers and consumers use terroir as an ordering and evaluative concept when it comes to quality of flavor, to the point that in France terroir is now used to market food and wine, indicating their quality.

LA SEMAINE DU GOÛT

The foodview *situating* taste and also developing a *discourse* about taste combining physiology, agriculture, and environment remains a potent force in France. While doing research on terroir I stayed in Montpellier, a lovely university town in southern France. Located in the Languedoc province, the town is a gateway to a major wine-producing region and also houses the University of Montpellier, which includes several academic departments and institutes devoted to viticulture and oenology.⁵⁷ One day I attended the annual Exposition of the Coteaux du Languedoc, an event championing a relatively new AOC wine-growing region (it was awarded AOC status in 1985), representing more than a hundred wineries. This region's western edge is Narbonne and it extends east to Montpellier. There are a number of soil and rock types in this region, and the traditional red grape varieties planted are grenache, syrah, and mourvèdre, with cinsault and carignan as the secondary varieties. All the promotional literature for this AOC region uses the tag line "L'Art de Faire Parler Le Terroir," which can be translated into English as "Fine Art from the Terroir," but a better translation might be "The Art of Expressing the Soil."

The event was held in the Mas de Saporta, a complex of buildings near the major highway that goes through Montpellier. The Mas (a traditional Occitan term for *farm*) is dominated by a large stucco structure that was a winemaking facility in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Mas de Saporta is the *maison des vins* (wine store), featuring Coteaux du Languedoc wines. The upstairs was a large hall filled with a number of wineries offering tastings of their wines. The downstairs consisted of several rooms, including a tasting room. Of the series of tastings held in this room during the exposition, I chose to attend "Eveil des Arômes pour les Enfants." An aroma tasting for children? At a wine expo? I was intrigued.

This was a first for me, perhaps because you would never find such an event in the United States, for beyond our notion that kids love sweets, we do not really consider children capable of discerning taste. By 3:30, the official starting time, the room was almost full with perhaps thirty children and twenty adults, and within half an hour another fifteen children filled it to capacity. Philippe Cabrit, an employee at Mas de Saporta, led the tasting. The entire event was patterned on a traditional wine tasting, but with fruit juice instead of wine.

The tasting reveals a fundamental assumption of the French foodview: when you eat or drink, it needs to be a shared experience that incorporates sensory analysis *and* sensory pleasure. The ability to discern tastes is a cultural imperative. So how did it work? Cabrit began the tasting by pouring two different types of flavored water into the same wine glasses used by adults. He said, "I don't care what you say; just tell me what you taste." As parents and children alike tasted, Cabrit described the different taste receptors found on the tongue, explaining where salt, sweet, bitter, and sour are tasted. He then said, "Taste, then reflect." The first glass of water had sugar in it: "Are you reminded of bonbons?" The second glass of water was a bit salty. He then moved on to juices. There were six different juices lined up at the head table, all covered with tinfoil. This would be a blind juice tasting. The children were excited: would they be able to guess?

Cabrit and his assistants poured the first juice into the wine glass farthest to the right in the lineup of six. After the juice was poured for all the children, Cabrit led them through the tasting, in a manner identical to that of a wine tasting. He told them to look first at the color. Was it translucent? Opaque? Then they were directed to swirl the glass and sniff. Cabrit informed them that much of taste is actually smell, and that the aroma of the juice would help them guess which fruits were used. As the children got to the third and fourth juices, they became more confident and began to contribute their perceptions. Juice number four was purple and looked like

grape juice, but many children noted that the taste was more sour. Several said it tasted like cassis, a sweet liqueur flavored with black currants. The juice turned out to be a blend of concord and muscat grapes with some black currant juice blended in. Cabrit asked, “Is this juice more or less acidic than juice number three?” The eight-year-old boy sitting next to me was completely enthralled, swirling, sniffing, tasting, and guessing. By the time juice number five was poured, Cabrit asked everyone to determine which of the fruit flavors was more dominant, and then informed the group about how the orange juice balanced the acidity of the more dominant grapefruit, creating a nice juice “equilibrium.” The tasting ended after juice number six, which Cabrit pointed out was notable for its high degree of sweetness and its viscosity, due to the bananas and milk that were combined with raspberry and orange juices. The room was abuzz, the tasting ended, and the parents and children slowly filed out, perhaps to go try their luck upstairs among the wines.

After the tasting ended I spoke to Cabrit to find out more about it. I had been entranced not only by the fact that such a tasting existed in the first place, but also by the clever way it mimicked a traditional wine tasting and the extent to which it engaged both the children and the adults. He said that the Mas de Saporta often hosts school groups who come for this “Eveil des Arômes.” He also mentioned that often these tastings were part of France’s annual *Semaine du Goût*, an initiative that began in 1990 to help French children learn how to discover tastes and flavor, or, as the official website puts it, “valorisant le goût, la qualité des produits et les savoirs-faire.” I knew of this “week of taste”; tastings such as the one at Mas de Saporta provided more evidence of that uniquely French sensibility toward taste.

Recently tastemakers and taste producers in France, sensing a decline in people’s ability to evaluate and appreciate food, especially unique French foods, started to feel that consumers, especially young ones, needed to be taught how to taste and how to develop their sense of discernment. The

“week of taste,” it was hoped, would “offer clear information and education to all as to food origins, how foods are made, and their quality.”⁵⁸ Every October in schools throughout France lessons on taste are incorporated into the curriculum. In 2004 such lessons occurred in five thousand classes of primary school students. Such a taste education is disseminated by people the organization call “taste ambassadors,” chefs, and other *artisans des métiers de bouche* who go into schools all over France to teach children. One lesson, similar to the juice tasting, introduces children to all the senses, with a concentration on taste and smell, while another explores the “tastes of France.” These tastes are mapped onto the geography of France as “thirty terroirs,” or regional specialties.⁵⁹ At restaurants, hundreds of chefs also provide children and their families special menus emphasizing regional specialties.

Making a link between taste and farmers and farming is another important element of the “week of taste.” As the Ministry of Agriculture states in official postings about the 2004 event, “L’agriculture donne du goût” (agriculture provides taste). The organization goes on to say, “What we eat, in the first instance, are the products of agriculture. At the heart of that moment are farmers [or agriculturalists], who provide our diverse and quality food.”⁶⁰ In this culture, the highly elaborated sense of taste is understood not to be purely physiological but also to encompass the physical and social environment creating the sensory experience. Or, as anthropologists put it, in France taste is a total social fact. Over the course of the “week of taste,” as many as sixty sites around France host events to showcase regional foods and wines and educate consumers with educational panels and tastings. During the 2004 week Hervé Gaymard, the minister of agriculture, stated that such interventions will allow the French to have deeper knowledge by creating a fuller understanding of the nation’s diverse *terroirs d’origine*.

The original impetus behind the Journée du Goût (which became the Semaine du Goût two years later) was the Collective du Sucre, an industry

organization, but other agricultural organizations later signed on, and in 2003 the French Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Fish, and Rural Affairs became a main government sponsor. The 2005 partners included the Ministry of Agriculture and numerous food product companies and lobbying organizations, including the event's founder, Collective du Sucre, as well as Rochefontaine (vegetables), Champion (small grocery stores), Baron de Lestac (Bordeaux wines), Neptune (mineral water), Sel de Camargue (salt), and more. Although this combination of invested parties may appear to resemble those behind the food expositions at American state agricultural affairs, in fact the French attempt to build consumer awareness by introducing pedagogies of taste into public schools is unique. The explicit analysis of taste and the connections between physiology and the environment in France marks a deep cultural difference between that country and the United States. Another difference between the two countries is the level of involvement by the "taste ambassadors." Above all, this community of government agencies, educational institutions, tastemakers, and food companies united around the desire to encourage discerning taste among schoolchildren embodies the unique French foodview, the intersection of taste, place, and agriculture.

Such a foodview in effect frames much of French government policy and practice on food and beverage, not simply the policies of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry of Tourism created a new program, "The 100 Remarkable Taste Sites," promoting tourism to places all around France distinguished by their unique food and wine. A British website on travel and tourism in France has this to say about the program: "A 'site remarquable du goût' is a monument to taste, identified by a real product with a history and a strong identity, the presence of an exceptional heritage defined by its aesthetic value and its link with the product, a welcome area which enables visitors to link place and product and a synergy between the product, the heritage and the welcome—focusing on a name and a strong local organisation."⁶¹ The lyrical language and nested phrasing indicate that this description was translated

directly from French. Nevertheless, the basic values are clear. A *site remarquable du goût* celebrates the taste of place.

While staying in Montpellier I visited Bouzigues, one of the one hundred remarkable taste sites. Located south of Montpellier on the Etang du Thau, a saltwater estuary of the Mediterranean, Bouzigues is a fishing village, but it is oyster farming that makes this little coastal town unusual. Historically, the primary activities here have been growing grapes for wine and fishing, along with the harvesting of some oysters. In the early twentieth century, however, a series of aquaculture experiments were conducted to see if oysters could be farm raised. (At the time, oysters were not only very popular in the region but were also an integral part of French haute cuisine.) The Oyster Museum, located at the end of a narrow street full of restaurants selling the town's signature oysters, details the story of local oyster farming, including the discovery that putting oyster seeds on ropes and hanging them off wooden platforms into the water was an excellent method of farming them. Bouzigues went on to become known in France and beyond for its succulent oysters, and one hundred years later it became a remarkable taste site. On the day I visited the little fishing town seemed sleepy and the museum was empty, but the restaurants were busy with people tasting the famed oysters, both raw and cooked.

In 2006 the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine teamed up with the 100 Sites Remarquable du Goût to create the Ateliers du Goût, a series of events highlighting AOC food and drink that come from designated "remarkable sites." The four events were intended to introduce journalists to the special tastes of the chosen food and drink (Chalosse beef and Armagnac, for example) and to promote an agriculture of "terroir and quality."⁶² One imagines that Curnonsky, de la Blache, and the *vignerons* of Champagne would be pleased with such an evening, which brought together the French Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Agriculture to celebrate France's unique terroirs and the goût du terroir of a steak and a brandy.

LOOKING FOR HOME

As we move into the twenty-first century, however, are all these French efforts to link taste, place, and agriculture and to educate people in taste discernment really an exercise in nostalgia, an attempt to recapture a bygone era? And if so, does this nostalgia extend beyond a taste memory for the foods and drinks of a region to encompass a certain way of life? The food-view based on terroir and *goût du terroir* initially elaborated a century ago as a means of protecting, preserving, and promoting artisan practices and regional identities allows the French, now primarily living in cities and towns, to flirt with a lifestyle more representative of the past than the present. But perhaps this rejection of progress makes perfect sense, for our modern times demand us to be so flexible and rational, yet we remain a sentient species. Should we not retain some control over our sensual pleasures?

In France terroir is often associated with *racines*, or roots, a person's history with a certain place. Local taste, or *goût du terroir*, is often evoked when an individual wants to remember an experience, explain a memory, or express a sense of identity. People will discuss *sentir le terroir*, to have the qualities (or even defects) of where you were born or live. *Gourmet* magazine explains to its American audience, "Even the most urbane boulevardier can become near-maudlin about his *terroir*, acknowledging roots reaching back to a province, a village, a family vegetable patch. . . . [H]is allegiance to the land of his fathers remains intact." In this form, taste in France mediates between the body and culture: the gustatory moment incorporates people's belief that the very soil, plants, climactic conditions, and animals make France a unique piece of the Earth rather than a nation among many others. And for the French, the moment when the earth travels to the mouth is a time of reckoning with local memory and identity.

Sociologist Barham also points to the French interest in documenting and preserving the nation's past, a fascination with *patrimoine*: "The taste

for history in the form of ‘produits de terroir,’ therefore, reflects in part the ongoing construction of a collective representation of the past through food that is perhaps largely unconscious for consumers.”⁶³ The French foodview, this sensibility about food and drink, situates their tastes and celebrates their origins. Such a sensibility, especially since it is reinforced by many individual, collective, and government efforts, means that a piece of cheese or a glass of wine exists as much more than an object to be bought and sold on the marketplace. And as historian Kyri Claffin points out, the French government has a long history of intervening in the provision of food to the French people, creating a “moral” market and exchange system: “From the end of the eighteenth century on, even with the success of the free market in many areas of French life, foods were not considered commodities like any other.”⁶⁴ There is a long-standing tradition of cultural intervention into the agrarian and culinary economies, making place matter—a lot.

At the same time, the taste of place also reflects the conscious decisions and actions of various invested parties who have a stake in the well-being of rural France—both the countryside and its residents—whose inhabitants often compete with each other in their attempts to use the past to assert a new future. In that light, Barham sees that “AOCs are now clearly recognized as important contributors to the economic and agricultural structure of a region, as well as to its shared identity.”⁶⁵

In March 2000 in Castelnau-la-Chappelle, I interviewed the operators of a small press that prints books related to the Dordogne region, including cookbooks, who argued that the emphasis on terroir has increased in the past thirty years, and that it is primarily a form of nostalgia. People are searching for their *racines*, or roots, as an antidote to their increasingly fast-paced urban lives. Only in the last ten years, they argued, have urban sophisticates begun to embrace *cuisine du terroir*. Earlier it was considered uncomplicated peasant food, heavy, often bland, and of no interest to cosmopolitan French people. The twenty-first-century understanding of the

taste of place adopts the long-held view that locations within France create unique flavors, only now celebrating these flavors increasingly involves rejecting the trappings of modernity and returning to earlier ways. In nineteenth-century France, saying a wine had a “goût du terroir” was to label it a *vin de paysans*, not worthy of more esteemed labels, such as *vin noble* or *vin classé*. In the twenty-first century, however, place as much as social position explains French wine (and food). It could be argued that goût du terroir has come to describe an aspect of French identity that is locally defined, but perhaps it is also ultimately part of a national project to preserve and promote France’s much-vaunted agrarian past. The “production of locality” through taste helps constitute the meaning of France in the midst of the global flow of ideas, ingredients, and values shaping our tastes for food and drink. Terroir, in all its manifestations, is our key to agrarian and culinary France.