The Problem of Meat and The Solution of the Vegetable: 
The Origin and Future of French Gastronomy

by

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Chapter 1
Constructing a National Identity through a Revolutionary Gastronomy

“It’s easy to see why The French Cook became such a sensation: it was quite simply the most revolutionary cookbook of all time.”¹

François Pierre de La Varenne’s cookbook, *Le Cuisinier François* (1651), has been said to have marked the beginning of authentic French cuisine.² It is also regarded as the prototype for the modern-day cookbook,³ with its recipes for delicious, rather than merely nutritious, meals. *Le Cuisinier François*, translated as “The French Cook,” symbolizes the beginning of France’s effort to distinguish itself from the rest of Europe, where Italy’s influence on culture (including language, art, and cuisine) had been dominant for centuries. France had redefined the European conception of food, and particularly the European conception of meat: a crucial ingredient found at the center of this revolutionary cookbook. Pâté, ragout, and bouillon are just a few of the many meat-based delicacies invented by the French chef. “Meat-making” had literally become an art form and it was an art form mastered by the French.

*Le Cuisinier François*, published under the auspices of King Louis XIV (La Varenne has been described as “Louis XVI’s court chef”)⁴, simultaneously introduced and promoted “Frenchness” for the very first time. Indeed, the notion of a “French” identity was so new that the contemporary word for “French” (“Français”) had not

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yet been invented.\textsuperscript{5} It is for this reason that we find “François,” as opposed to “Français,” on the cookbook’s cover page. In fact, Le Cuisinier François might be more accurately translated as “The Frankish Chef.”\textsuperscript{6} Nonetheless, the book touted the creation of a distinctively French cuisine and cultivated the French ego and well-known sense of superiority. La Varenne’s act of defining what is – or who is – truly “French” by way of his novel cuisine allowed the kingdom of France to stand out among the rest of its European neighbors.

France and its people had taken on a distinct essence and flavor and the world was eager to get a taste. King Louis XIV, La Varenne’s employer, had been successful in his mission to “make both himself and his country legendary” by setting “new standards for food, fashion, and interior design.”\textsuperscript{7} The French would eventually become proud to embrace their international reputation and hone their authority in style and luxury. The newly-defined kingdom quickly rose to power, becoming one of the world’s largest colonial empires in history – an empire that peaked during the kingship of Louis XIV.\textsuperscript{8} The French enjoyed their centuries-long world dominance and growing international prominence. The kingdom famous, and they liked it.

As global politics dramatically shifted during the World Wars, nearly three hundred years after France’s reputation had been established, so did international power dynamics. Today, the French yearn for the power and prestige they once had; in doing so, they hold on tightly to their cuisine: a former anchor of that power and

\textsuperscript{5} Dictionnaire critique de la langue française (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1787), s.v. “Français.” University of Chicago’s ARTFL Project provides a database of old French dictionaries and is a collaboration between the French government and the University of Chicago.

\textsuperscript{6} Online Etymology Dictionary (2001), s.v. “Francis.”

\textsuperscript{7} DeJean, The Essence of Style, 2.

prestige. As the global community develops new culinary preferences, such as more plant-based dishes, will the French adopt these preferences, or will they defiantly defend their tradition-soaked taste buds, basted in animal juices? I will aim to provide some possible answers to this question. But first, in order to successfully do that, let us familiarize ourselves with the text that set the foundations for French food fame.

I. Defining a Classic

*Le Cuisinier François* and the changes it would inspire represent a paradigm food revolution, at least according to our modern conception of revolution: an overhaul of the old and a bold and often contentious introduction of the new. In the traditional sense, revolution takes on a very different meaning. The word, deriving from Old French’s “revolucion,” was first used in astronomy to refer to celestial bodies, which continuously *return to their original position* – this suggests a kind of continuity despite inevitable and ongoing change, or movement. This notion of revolution would appear to contrast sharply with our modern conception of the word. The more recent interpretation was introduced during the seventeenth century, but the older interpretation was arguably not overhauled by the new one until the French Revolution of 1789, whose actors had no desire to return to any kind of *original* state but instead wished to invent an entirely new state altogether. One might say it was a “revolutionary revolution” – redefining the very notion of revolution.

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10 “Revolution” is defined by *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “involving or causing a complete or dramatic change.”
Le Cuisinier François appears to embody both senses of revolution, making it revolutionary twice over. It is not inspired by a cuisine of the past; it marks an entirely new beginning, a true overhaul of the old. Yet, it has the qualities necessary to hold it firmly in place despite the world’s inevitably ongoing change; Le Cuisinier François is a classic. A classic is often awarded the status of “great” by an implicit consensus among contemporary field experts (in this case, respected chefs throughout Europe). However, it can only prove with the passing of time, decades\textsuperscript{12} eventually centuries,\textsuperscript{13} and even millennia,\textsuperscript{14} that it is a true classic, that its model status persists – and not only among experts but also for society at large.\textsuperscript{15}

Timelessness is surely what distinguishes a classic from a mere trend or fad. Trends are never classics, although they may be “revolutionary” in so far as they present something truly original. Trends temporarily set a new standard for style while rejecting old standards. They cannot, however, survive the world’s ever-evolving interests and tastes. Will vegan cuisine be a mere trend (if at all) or does it have the potential of becoming a French classic? Is veganism strong enough to compete with the traditional meat- and dairy-heavy French gastronomy, a gastronomy which has been a “classic” for over three-and-a-half centuries? These are some of the questions I will raise towards the end of this thesis.

Before we can begin to answer these questions, we must first consider in great detail the revolutionary nature of Le Cuisinier François and, essentially, the

\textsuperscript{12}For example, To Kill a Mockingbird.
\textsuperscript{13}For example, Mona Lisa.
\textsuperscript{14}For example, The Bible.
\textsuperscript{15}“Classic” is defined by Oxford English Dictionary as: “judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind.”
revolutionary nature of French cuisine in general. Thus, the first two chapters of this thesis will be dedicated to the analysis of *Le Cuisinier François* and the final chapter will be dedicated to the recent arrival of vegetable-based cuisine in France. We could reasonably say that *Le Cuisinier François* (even in 2019) fits the criteria for a classic rather than a trend. It has arguably passed the test of time. Indeed, according to French cuisine historians, Philip and Mary Hyman, it is the first official documentation of *traditional* French cuisine, another word that connotes persistence through time – *valued* persistence, in particular.

II. Out with the Old and In with the New: A French Identity Emerges

That France is known for its food is no surprise. Their traditional gastronomy is recognized and valued not only nationally but also internationally, as is evident from the abundance of French “food words” and phrases that have been imported into other languages: *gourmet, cuisine, bon appétit*. Some of these French expressions are used so often that many of us (English speakers) are unaware of their French origin: *chef, restaurant, menu, café, entrée*. French food and the practices and manners that surround it, from when you dine to how you set the table, are widely viewed as the “classic” means to “good” and indeed “proper” eating. In fact, many of the French “food words” we use are tied not simply to eating itself but rather the *way*, the *proper* way, of eating. *Chef, restaurant, menu, café*, and *entrée* all relate to the experience of *dining* rather than *eating*. French food does not simply exist but *performs*.

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16 “Several important [Italian-style] cookbooks were published in the 1540s in France and reprinted until the beginning of the 17th century. However no new [distinctively French] collection of recipes would appear until the publication of La Varenne’s *Cuisinier français* in 1651” (Hyman, introduction to *The French Cook*, vi).

17 “Tradition” is defined by *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.”
“Traditional” French cuisine and associated dining practices, however, began their history only several hundred years ago, during the mid-seventeenth century, when François Pierre de La Varenne published his cookbook, *Le Cuisinier François* (*The French Cook*). It marked the beginning of authentic French cuisine.\(^\text{18}\) It turns out that the highly-regarded French gastronomy did not gracefully fall from the *haute cuisine* heavens but rather had a carefully crafted, politically charged, and controversial beginning. Indeed, “the most evident characteristic of the new French cuisine was newness itself,”\(^\text{19}\) says French historian, Joan DeJean. *Le Cuisinier François* would transform the way France, Europe, and much of the Western world conceived of food, cooking, dining, and even national identity. The revolutionary cookbook’s content contrasted dramatically with the cultural norms that had been embraced by the rest of Europe, where Italy’s influence on culture (art, religion, language, cuisine, etc.) had been dominant for centuries.

Up until La Varenne, the continent had been dominated by the Romans. The enormously powerful Roman Empire reigned for over 500 years, from 27 BCE to 476 CE, spanning all of Western Europe as well as the non-European Mediterranean region. Rome was its capital and Latin was its language. Despite its political fall, its cultural influence continued to dominate for the next 500 years. Europe passively accepted its culture as it struggled with feudal wars, endemic plagues, and religious tensions throughout the Medieval period. Italian culture was then “reborn” in Europe during the Renaissance with the leadership of influential Italian figures, both famous and infamous, including Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Machiavelli and the

\(^{18}\) Hyman, introduction to *The French Cook*, vi.

\(^{19}\) DeJean, *The Essence of Style*, 109.
Medici family. Europe’s essence was distinctively Roman (i.e., Italian). France did not escape this influence nor did France’s food.

France was in agreement with the rest of Europe: fine food involved the Italian-style of cooking, expensive imported spices from the Silk Road, and meats drenched in sweet and sour sauces. “Exotic” ingredients implied worldly exploration or conquest, which were of great significance to royalty and nobility. “Spices such as galangal, a gingerlike root from Asia, and peppery ‘grains of paradise’ from West Africa would have been well known to a French chef.” There was consensus among the upper class that these ingredients were “simply more appealing than domestic European herbs.” So, local flavors were in the background. In fact, flavor in general was not the primary concern for chefs during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance period, health was. Spices from the Middle Eastern region were sought after for their supposed medicinal properties. Food and beverage were thought to directly influence one’s “humors,” (e.g.) making one strong for war or clever for treaty negotiation. Food was more a medicine to be taken than an indulgence to be savored.

The theory of the “humors” was not the only category-based science for thinking about the kind of food one should ingest. “The nobility [of feudal France] tended to adhere to an elaborate gastronomic code that ranked food in a hierarchy.

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20 “During the Renaissance, Italy set the standard for fine dining” (DeJean, The Essence of Style, 3).
21 Hyman, introduction to The French Cook, v.
23 Ibid., 106.
according to the four classical elements of fire, air, water, and earth,” with fire held in the highest esteem and earth held in the lowest, reports French food historians, Stéphanie Hénaut and Jeni Mitchell. A fire-based dish would consist of a roasted meat, whereas an earth-based dish would consist of root vegetables. Peasants were therefore left with the “unhealthy” diet of “rye, barely, and oats… cooked into a porridge or gruel, or baked into bread…. [as well as fresh] leeks, onions, carrots, parsnips, and spinach.” Ninety-five percent of the French kingdom was effectively forced into a “lowly” mostly-vegan diet. “Nobles shunned most vegetables… [however] plants that grew out of the soil and reached for the sky – and were therefore closer to the second element, air – were nobler.” Air-based birds or water-based fish were also rather inoffensive foods. The preferred food, however, was unambiguous: “Nobles would eat meat and meat and, if possible, a bit more meat” – of course, this was purely “medicinal” meat sprinkled with digestive spices.

These meticulously seasoned dishes were reserved for the elite and their recipes rarely escaped a palace’s kitchen. According to Terence Scully, a French historian and author, royal recipes and special cooking techniques were considered “secret knowledge” that belonged to master chefs. Such information was transmitted orally and systematically within a highly-competitive and hierarchical food preparation guild system. In fact, navigating oneself up this culinary hierarchy was one of the very few ways a commoner could join the company of the aristocracy.

26 Ibid., 40.
27 Ibid., 39.
28 Ibid., 41.
29 Ibid., 41.
Indeed, La Varenne, who rose from a commoner to a nobleman, was a case in point, reports Philip and Mary Hyman. When *Le Cuisinier François* was published in 1651, norms regarding both ingredients and cooking changed dramatically. The discrediting of food as medicine left the meaning of food undefined. Fortunately, food quickly took on a new purpose: flavor. La Varenne was excited to indulge in this dietary revolution. No longer were meats drowned in overpowering exotic dressings but instead the natural flavor of meat was complimented and enhanced with legumes and herbs from the French terroir. Vegetables also began to compete with meat for center stage of a dish. Indeed, sometimes vegetables were the dish. La Varenne once wrote: “When I eat Cabbage soup, I want it to taste like cabbage.” However, soups would typically only whet one’s appetite for the main dish, which was almost invariably some kind of meat roast. Vegetables continued to be outshined but they were at least now held in much higher regard than previously. Chives, garlic, shallots, and mushrooms often snuck their way into royal diets by means of a sauce, slowly becoming “accepted and popularized by the noble and wealthy classes.” Sauces underwent other notable changes as well: butter and oil replaced vinegar and spices, the former pair thought of as “more respectful to the natural taste of food.”

As French chefs aimed to create the most natural flavors possible, freshness became a priority and freshness required *local* ingredients. Ingredients from the

31 Hyman, introduction to *The French Cook*, vii.
French terroir were now preferred over the spices and herbs of faraway lands – although a handful of New World ingredients did find their way into some recipes. Flavor, freshness, and presentation were in fashion and the medicinal properties of food were forgotten. King Louis XIV of France had notorious cravings for fresh food: he “had a taste for salad and was known to eat a good amount of raw vegetables.” Raw food was so beloved that even “fruit was served in the shape of large pyramids.” The influence of French food preferences impacted those abroad: “The English realized that it was perfectly safe to eat raw fruit and vegetables, and began to enjoy salads with their meals.”

III. Power to the People and an International Market

Le Cuisinier François not only inspired changes within the realm of cuisine but also within the realms of society and politics. No longer were the recipes of haute cuisine, high-quality food, hidden away in the minds of a select few; they were instead written down and shared with the rest of the world – or at least those who had the means to afford the cookbook. This shift toward inclusivity was made clear in La Varenne’s dedication to his employer, Louis Chaalon Du Bled, the head advisor to the king. In the cookbook’s dedication, La Varenne begins by listing all the nobility who have “cherished” his “delicate meats” (the French Princess, high ranking army men, and an “infinite number of persons of quality” from Paris). After highlighting the great success of his recipes among the crème de la crème, La Varenne then

36 There is a handful of recipes that call for turkey (“poulet d’Inde”) found throughout The French Cook.
38 “1600s food,” The British Library.
40 Ibid., 4.
proceeds with his unconventional proposal: “I think that the publique ought to receive the profit of this experience of mine.”41 This “experience” refers to La Varenne’s inventing of countless new and refined recipes worthy of the most noble members of the French kingdom. In effect, La Varenne is requesting that these recipes (most likely perceived as property of the King, as La Varenne was an employee of the King42) be handed over to the public, a group largely unfamiliar with such high-quality dishes. During the seventeenth century, the “public” would indeed have been understood as that concerning “all people.”43 La Varenne’s sharing of royal culinary information was truly avant-garde. In France, this new conception of culinary information as (appropriately) public information appears to have received significant pushback. The cookbook no doubt put political changes in motion, but these changes would not be fully recognized for quite some time. According to Jean-Paul Aron, the author of The Art of Eating in France: even nearly a century after the publication of Le Cuisinier François, “almost no gastronomic information is available in France… bookshops do a brisk trade in almanacs on cookery, health and the markets, but these publish recipes, prescriptions or lists of food prices [were] only a remote reflection of the actual alimentary life.” 44 Thus, the details of royal banquets were rumors at best. High-class cookery was a trade that relied upon well-kept secrets.

41 Ibid., 4.
42 La Varenne referred to Louis Chaalon Du Bled as his “Lord” (i.e. employer) and Du Bled was employed by the King, serving as a royal “counsellor” (La Varenne, The French Cook, trans. I.D.G., 4).
43 Dictionnaire critique de la langue française (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1694), s.v. “Public.”
It would not be until the 1780s that gourmet eating becomes an aspect of daily life in Paris.”\textsuperscript{45} However, La Varenne’s plea for publicity was embraced immediately and enthusiastically in a neighboring country: England. Just prior to the 1651 publication, the English had been experiencing major political and cultural changes during the reign of Oliver Cromwell of the Commonwealth (1643 – 1651). As the country was experiencing its own political and cultural revolution, “cookery books appeared to be opening magical doors onto the glittering secrets of the wealthy.”\textsuperscript{46} The fall of the English monarchy left many royal chefs without a job and searching for other means of employment. As a result, several of these chefs turned entrepreneurial. Their services were eagerly received by bourgeoisie wishing to mimic the eating behaviors of royalty. It was a time in which secret information was made available for the first time to “those unfamiliar with the etiquette of the wealthy, guiding them on subjects such as bills of fare, or servant behavior.”\textsuperscript{47}

It is therefore no surprise that in 1653, only two years after its initial publication, \textit{Le Cuisinier François} was translated into English. Despite England’s own royal culinary secrets running wild, it was ultimately the French who were credited with inventing the modern-day cookbook. In Commonwealth England, this literary innovation would have symbolized the country’s newly-embraced “power to the people” mentality— even among nobility. A London publisher, who went by the title of I.D.G., was apparently solicited by a “noble Knight” to produce an English translation of \textit{Le Cuisinier François}. This publisher quickly saw the opportunity to

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. 15.  
\textsuperscript{46} “The Queen's Closet Opened - Royal plagues,” \textit{The British Library}.  
\textsuperscript{47} “1600s food,” \textit{The British Library}.  

market La Varenne’s book to a wide audience, beyond knights and lords. In his message to the reader, I.D.G. writes that he has endeavored to “make it intelligible for everybody… for every private family, even to the Husband man or Labouring man, wheresoever the English tongue is, or may be used.”

I.D.G.’s introduction was preceded by a dedication written by someone who signed themselves as “Servant Du Fresne.” This man dedicated the book to his Lord, “The Right Honorable John Earl of Tannet.” Du Fresne wrote: “Of all Cooks in the World the French are esteem’d the best, and of all Cooks that ever France bred up, this may well challenge the first place, as the neatest and completest that ever did attend the French Court and Armies.” Du Fresne spoke so highly of La Varenne perhaps not only because he appreciated the French style of cooking but also because he knew La Varenne. In fact, he taught him to speak English so as to “furnish [his Lord’s] Table with several Sauces of haut goust, & with dainty ragousts, and sweet meats, as yet hardly known in this Land.” In fact, it was not uncommon during that time for the English to import “Frenchness” into their kingdom through the means of a chef.

Samuel Pepys, an English parliament member famous for the diaries he wrote from 1659 to 1669, had an affinity for French food. (Indeed, he may have been more sympathetic to the interests of France than those of his own kingdom, as he reportedly

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49 The decision to italicize the word “France” (along with “haut goust” and “ragousts”) might indicate that the writer, and perhaps others from England, may have conceived of this word as still belonging to the French language, as opposed to it having been anglicized. This “non-anglicization” might imply that certain French words and French cultural phenomena were just beginning to be discussed or referred to in England, and possibly other European kingdoms.
50 I.D.G., introduction to The French Cook, 1.
sold naval secrets to the French army.) Pepys was thoroughly impressed by his friend’s hiring of a French chef. This new foreign employee was responsible for Pepys’s friend becoming the “perfect courtier.” In his journals, we also learn just how great Pepy’s affinity for the French was: while fires burned in Long, Pepys wrote of “his feverish attempts to save his possessions, scrambling in panic for his bottles of wine and his parmesan cheese, all of which [were] buried safely in his garden”52

Only two years after La Varenne published his famous cookbook, he was living and working in England, where he searched out employment with the country’s nobility. Perhaps La Varenne saw a bright future in England, where recipes were being made public in the form of cookbooks and palace chefs were turning entrepreneurial. Even though French-style chefs had plenty of English-style chefs to compete with, “French cuisine enlivened the English palate, flavouring its food with anchovies, capers and wine, and introducing coulis, roux, ragouts and fricassé.” This strong French influence imported a “greater taste for savoury dishes,” pushing aside the traditional combinations of sweet and sour flavours53

Yet, does this short-lived political situation54 in England fully explain the immense success of the French cookbook in that country? How did something so seemingly banal become an international bestseller?55 The book’s full title spells out the humble objective: *Le Cuisinier François, enseignant la manière de bien apprêter & assaisonner toutes fortes de viandes, grasses & maigres, légumes & pâtisseries en*

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51 “Samuel Pepys (1633 - 1703),” *BBC.*
52 “1660s food,” *The British Library.*
53 Ibid.
perfection, etc. This can be roughly translated as: The French Cook, teaching how to well prepare and season all hardy meat, fat & lean, vegetables & pastries in perfection, etc. By today’s standards, these words are as politically neutral as words can be. However, as mentioned above, making special recipes and cooking techniques publicly available in seventeenth-century Europe would have naturally sparked significant controversy throughout and beyond the cooking community. Historian Joan DeJean writes the following about the *Le Cuisinier François* frenzy:

> It was quickly translated into every major European language; never before had a cookbook gained an international following. For the next fifteen years, books about food poured off the presses in France. It is estimated that over ninety thousand copies of these new titles circulated there during the second half of the seventeenth century, an enormous figure at a time when a thousand copies constituted an excellent print run. We don’t know who was reading these books, but the subject obviously interested many outside the limited circle of professional chefs.

> Anyone who could afford to purchase a book could now get an idea, or maybe even a taste, of what had been previously reserved only for a king’s table. Perhaps, however, sparking controversy was the intention of the book. It did direct significant attention toward France, which was hungry for international recognition. Moreover, the recipes themselves did indeed require an acquired taste. Some abroad were reluctant to accept the new “haute cuisine” over the food familiar to their own nations. “Although the Whig aristocracy employed French chefs, the swelling ranks

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56 Pierre François La Varenne, *Le Cuisinier François* (1651), title page.
of middle England liked their simple, plain fare, enjoying roast and boiled meats, pies, and puddings.” In fact, “roast beef became part of the construction of a British national identity” This “food patriotism” was arguably created in England in response to “the fancy sauces of France.”

Nonetheless, controversy is a key ingredient in grabbing attention, especially international attention. La Varenne was, of course, ready to give his response to such an audience: “My intention is not to displease or offend anybody, though I do not doubt but that some ill-willers, or some envious, will speak of [my cookbook] at random; but my intention is to serve and succor them who shall stand in need of it,” including those who “dare not presume to learn what they know not, partly through pride.” In other words, one might read La Varenne here as saying “I know you don’t want to read my cookbook and eat my food only because you’re too ‘stuck up’ and think your own country is better… even though it’s probably not.” Controversial indeed.

Eventually, the complaints of the stubborn or conservative would be drowned out by overwhelming praise. “People in cities all over Europe became slaves to French food.” One notable German philosopher, Christian Thomasius, would proclaim in 1687, just a few decades after Le Cuisinier Francois was released, that: “Today we want everything to be French. French clothes, French dishes, French furniture.” We can also speculate that a number of other European countries were thoroughly impressed with the new French cuisine (and overall sense of

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58 “1700s food,” The British Library.
59 La Varenne, The French Cook, 6.
60 DeJean, The Essence of Style, 4.
61 Ibid., 4.
sophistication). An Italian historian writing the 1690s reported that after the hoard of Englishman arrived in France to tour the country, they were followed by the Germans, the Dutch, and the Scandinavians. Eventually the Italians and Spanish arrived in smaller numbers. The former may have been hesitant to adopt the culture of those who had replaced their own once continent-dominating culture. The latter may have been distracted by the new cuisine they were developing, which embraced many New World ingredients. Nonetheless, during the second half of the seventeenth century, “Paris became enshrined as gastronomy’s international capital.” There was little if any competition: “the French way of preparing food… quickly became dominant all over Western Europe. That doctrine was accepted virtually without question for three and a half centuries, the longest reign of any national tradition over the culinary world.”

IV. Touting France: Leader in Luxury

By breaking away from the culinary norms of the time, France built a reputation for itself as an emerging leader in the Western world. Europe took an interest in this French leadership, as Italy’s “novelty” was finally beginning to wear off. The unconventional (and distinctively French) cuisine was taken seriously, as France had been steadily developing expertise in the manufacture of “high-end goods” during the previous two decades. However, “in the sixteenth century, the French were not thought of as the most elegant or the most sophisticated European

62 Joan DeJean, The Essence of Style, 108.
63 The development of luxury products was promoted by King Henri IV in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Hénaut and Mitchell, A Bite-Sized History of France, 126). François Pierre (dit La Varenne) may have been directly inspired by the luxury-related work of Henri IV, as he named himself after the cuisinier of that King, “La Varenne” (DeJean, The Essence of Style, 107).
nation.” It was only after the publication of *Le Cuisinier François*, that much of Europe paid significant attention to, and developed a real respect for, France.

La Varenne’s seemingly simple and unassuming cookbook served as a complex and highly-political tool of the time. It coincided with the first ever attempt to truly define “Frenchness” as a cultural phenomenon. After the fall of the Roman Empire, European kingdoms were constantly “shapeshifting” and the concept of “nationalism” would not be recorded until 1830. Countries, or rather kingdoms, were conceived of as involving nothing more than feudal relationships between a king, his land, and all “tenants” living on his land. King Louis XIV of France was one of the first to add another layer to this conception. The Sun King would create a cohesive “flavor” for his country by selecting specific aspects of the culture and terroir that he deemed best. He used these special, and uniquely French, qualities to tout his Kingdom’s superiority. Indeed, *Le Cuisinier François*, published under his auspices, did exactly this.

The theme of an emerging French identity, or the *naissance* of “Frenchness,” is made even more evident when considering the language in which *Le Cuisinier François* was published. Before the Renaissance, nearly all written and administrative documents were in Latin. Although Latin had little colloquial use at the time, it was the written language of the educated. In the sixteenth century, Middle French would legally become the language of the European continent even though only a fraction

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64 Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style*, 3.
65 According to, Polly Russell, a curator at The British Library, La Varenne had become famous all across aristocratic Europe because of his bestselling book. (Polly Russell, “The history cook: Le Cuisinier François, by La Varenne,” *Financial Times*.)
67 This became the case when the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts was passed in 1539. It was a legal reform that established “Francien as the only official language [of the French Kingdom] after it proved
of the population understood this language and Latin still remained popular among the literate. La Varenne’s decision, likely supported by or perhaps even encouraged by the king of France, to write *Le Cuisinier François* in the early modern French language would have been conscious and highly-political. Indeed, the relationship between language, politics, and the growth of France was not ignored by Louis XIV.

Sue Wright, expert on French language and history, writes the following:

> France’s political and military power was at its height in the long reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) … In the treaties that fixed the new frontiers… the king demanded that French be the medium of negotiation. In the Treaty of Rastadt (1714) [modern] French replaced Latin as the medium for the written record of diplomacy. ⁶⁸

La Varenne’s cookbook was published sixty-three years before this treaty was written, thereby officially breaking the respected rule of using Latin or Middle French for such official documents. It promoted a new language for a new era. *Le Cuisinier François* came at a time when the French language was establishing itself as the lingua franca of the modern world, a title it would bear until the twentieth century when it was replaced by English (a major blow to the French ego). Indeed, some of the greatest forward-thinkers of the day were also beginning to publish in modern French and they too were politically-motivated. “Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* (1637) is one of the first important modern philosophical works not written in Latin.

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Descartes said that he wrote in French so that all who had good sense, including women, could read his work and learn to think for themselves.”\textsuperscript{69}

French language enables French thought, and Europe’s upper class was desperate to peer into the minds of the French. Anyone who was educated and concerned about their social status was eager to become familiar with the newest innovations in style (as well as in science and philosophy). In the century following the publication of *Le Cuisinier François*, France developed a monopoly on the world’s luxury trade, Paris would become the world’s capital for art and fashion, and tourism across the country would skyrocket.\textsuperscript{70} In the course of the seventeenth century, thanks to its newly-earned popularity, ‘Paris more than doubled in size,” catching up to its competitor, London.\textsuperscript{71} France had confidently nudged its way into the spotlight of seventeenth (eighteenth and nineteenth) century Europe and its fancy new food was placed at centerstage.

The revolutionary cookbook (when translated) is entitled, *The French Cook*. In 1651, this would have been considered a bold title with a clear and striking message. After all, from the perspective of anyone not belonging to classes of royalty or nobility, “French” as a descriptive characteristic at that particular time was relatively new.\textsuperscript{72} One might have recognized oneself as a member of the French kingdom, as sub-servant to the French king, but would not necessarily have identified oneself as “French.” It is likely that one would have instead viewed oneself as

\textsuperscript{69} Richard Watson, “René Descartes,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
\textsuperscript{70} DeJean, *The Essence of Style*, 16.
\textsuperscript{71} De Jean, *The Essence of Style*, 6.
\textsuperscript{72} It would not be until 1787 that either the term “François” or “Français” would be recorded in a French dictionary (“Dictionnaire d’autrefois,” *Univeristy of Chicago*).
entangled in system that is called “French.” *Le Cuisinier François* communicates that the dishes described within the book are *distinctively* French because of the identity of their *cuisinier*, their “cook.” It is not merely the ingredients or style of cooking that makes the food French, but also the “Frenchness” of the chef himself. This raises the question of whether such a chef derives his French status from actually *being* French or from a kind of *imitation*: from learning the French way. I suspect that La Varenne himself would have claimed that the Frenchness of a French chef derives from a *combination* of these two qualities. But what exactly would it have meant to be “French”?

Perhaps we should look to King Louis XVI for a possible answer. The Sun King, *le Roi Soleil*, appears to have considered the central requirement for (seventeenth-century) French membership to be simply that one resides within his kingdom, under his far-reaching shining rays of authority and influence. His conception of France was doubtless an egocentric one. “I am the state,” he once proclaimed. His personal connection to the kingdom was so strong, so permanent, that he even went as far as to suggest that France would embody his immortality: “I am dying, but the state remains.”

What do these words suggest about those abroad, who might have been interested in adopting certain French characteristics (such as their cooking and dining practices)? Would Louis XIV have supported the idea that one had the capacity to be “French” (or at least partially French) even when not under his direct rule? Would embracing certain aspects of French culture have been enough? Perhaps, but *only if*

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73 We might thus ask whether the famously British Julia Child is truly a French chef.
those aspects included deference to both Paris and its new cuisine. Such deference is nicely captured in La Varenne’s “gift” of his cookbook (of its “fruits”) to Paris: “I hope, that since that I do give [Paris] the first fruits of [this cookbook], she will accept them kindly and others will imitate her. After which other Nations may very well be stirred forward to conform themselves to [Paris].”

The attitude that Paris is a model of sorts, a “paradigm” city to which other “nations” should attempt to conform, would undoubtedly have resonated with Louis XIV. It was crucial for the Sun King that those who embrace a “French identity” remember that Paris, France is the origin of that identity and that only those “of” Paris, France can embody the best and most pure form of this identity. Imitation is key, as is the hierarchal nature of French Identity: The King (as opposed to Paris), Paris (as opposed to the Provinces), all of France (as opposed to all other nations). Echoing these sentiments, La Varenne remarks: “The City of Paris [carries itself] far above all the other Provinces, as the Metropolitan head City, and the seat of our Kings, doubtless her inferiors will in this follow the esteem she make of [this cookbook.]” These remarks make sense in view of the fact that France in the seventeenth century was still technically a kingdom (i.e., ruled by a king) rather than a nation, nonetheless it was developing a cohesive identity: an identity with origins in culture as much as in conquest.

Indeed, although Louis XIV spent virtually his entire career waging wars so as to geographically and governmentally expand his kingdom, it was his cultural (culinary, artistic, linguistic, and religious) expansion that would outlast him. It is possible that he realized this in his final moments of life, as his spoke to his son, who
would soon inherit his creation: “My child, you are going to be a great king; do not imitate me in the taste I have had for building, or in that I have had for war; try, on the contrary, to be at peace with your neighbors… try to comfort your people, which I unhappily have not done.”74 Although the Sun King expressed his disapproval of war in his dying moments, it is unlikely that he would have renounced imperial expansion altogether. Perhaps the non-violent adoption of French identity, such as through the means of a bestselling cookbook, would have been considered an appropriate means of moving forward his legacy that is the “French way.” Regardless of his final belief on the matter, “the King created new standards… that were accepted as an inherently French.” “Haute cuisine had become “inextricable from France’s national image.”75

France ultimately presented itself as the creator and teacher of civilized taste – of real “culture.” It was the realization of one of the world’s most successful “marketing dreams.”76 France capitalized on the European search for a new continental leader by building a unique brand that was sure to gain attention: the world’s leader in luxury. The success of their “brand building” resulted in a centuries-long accumulation of wealth, power, and respect. As I shall argue in the next chapter, one might even say that France did not merely take on a leadership role but obtained a virtual monopoly on modern aesthetics. It was arguably food, distinctively French food, that dominated this new take on the sensorial pleasures. France gave new meaning to the word “taste” (goût). Indeed, for the rest of history, the Western world would defer to the French in matters of sophistication, particularly with relation to

75 Jean DeJean, The Essence of Style, 9.
76 Ibid., 9.
cuisine. As one expert in the history of style puts it, “food became cuisine and cuisine became French.”
Chapter 2
Overlooked for Three-and-a-half Centuries: La Varenne’s “Secret” & The Transformation of Meat

I. La Varenne’s own Explanation for his Cookbook’s Success

French food changed in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels during the seventeenth century. La Varenne documented, synthesized, refined, and even implemented some of these changes: from an emphasis on health to an emphasis on flavor, from an admiration of the exotic to an admiration for the local, and from a desire for foods masked in spices to a desire for food’s natural taste. Modern French cuisine also began to symbolize shifts in larger political and cultural dynamics: valuable cooking information was no longer kept private but was widely publicized and the cultural (and linguistic) dominance in Europe shifted from Italian to French. For these reasons, Le Cuisinier François was given unprecedented attention across the Western world. It reflected and reinforced some of the most important dynamics that distinguished the seventeenth century from the Medieval era and provided clear directions to its readers regarding how to be sophisticated; it outlined the “tastes” (literally and metaphorically) one must acquire in order to belong to the citizenry of the modern, French-dominated world. The Kingdom of France presented itself as the creator and teacher of civilized taste and of “high-quality” pleasures. A new aesthetic standard was set – a standard the French would apply to all of its possessions, including its food. In a note to his readers, La Varenne writes: “France carrying it above all other Nations in the world in point of civility, courtesy and comeliness in every kind of conversation, is not less esteemed, because of its comely and dainty
fashion of feeding.” As one expert in the history of style puts it, “food became cuisine and cuisine became French.”

La Varenne, however, did not specify any one of these aforementioned changes (in flavor or in culture) as the intended theme or effect of his work. So then, what did the great chef identify as the intention of his publication? What discovery or novel insight was at the center of the cookbook from his perspective? His answer is clear. “During a whole ten years employment in your house, I have found the secret [of] how to make meats ready neatly and daintily.” La Varenne writes these words in the book’s dedication to his employer, the marquis of Uxelles. He is happy to report that after a decade of hard work in the royal kitchen, he has finally succeeded in (i.e.) transforming meat (and its preparation) from something that it apparently was not to something that it now could be – all thanks to his discovering of a “secret.”

From this information, we can conclude with some confidence that in 1651 the terms “neat” and “dainty” would not have been used to describe the preparation of meat – its butchering, its cooking, and (with the advent of gastronomy) its serving. Instead, these “haute” terms would have been contrary to the default and far more natural descriptions of meat and its “lowly” rendering process. In fact, medieval Europe’s meat processing professionals ranked unambiguously low in the social hierarchy and for understandable reasons. According to Susan Crane’s research, “butchers [of Medieval Europe had] low social status because they [dealt] with animals’ dead bodies.” Indeed, a craft that involves a corpse would have been

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79 The only exception was hunting, which involved an “exceptional formality of butchering,” being praised as an “exemplary performance… [distinguishing] cutting up boar on hunting from butchering.
naturally cumbersome. Thus, if one were to render meat “neatly” and “daintily,” it would have been of considerable significance – indeed, the ability to do so was worthy of being deemed a “secret.”

It is rather surprising that virtually no scholarly attention has been paid to La Varenne’s provocative statement about meat: the only statement (in the letter to his employer) he made about the inventiveness of his deservedly famous cookbook. For those interested in studying the revolutionary nature of La Varenne’s work, which redefined the way we prepare, present, eat, and conceive of food, it would be a disservice not to investigate what exactly was meant by his words.

In order to arrive at a thorough and accurate understanding of the key terms (“neatly” and “daintily”) used to describe La Varenne’s meat rendering, it is important to take into account both the earliest English translation (1653) of the sentence as well as the exact wording found in the original French version (1651). In the original _Le Cuisinier François_, la Varenne writes the following: “J’ay trouvé dans votre maison par un employ de dix ans entiers le secret d’appréter délicatement les viandes.” Two years later, I.D.G. translated this into English: “During a whole ten years employment in your house, I have found the secret how to make meats ready neatly and daintily.” We could assume that I.D.G.’s word “daintily” is the translation of La Varenne’s word “delicatement” because delicately and daintily then had and still have) fairly similar meanings. The statement’s other key word, “neatly,” might


This is according to the definitions found in the oldest French language dictionary (1606) and oldest English language dictionary (1604): _Thresor de la langue Francoys tant ancienne que modern_ by David Douceur and _A Table Alphabetical_ by Robert Cawdrey.
appear to fall within the translation of the verb “apprêter:” to make ready (neatly). However, in Early Modern as well as contemporary French, this word is most commonly translated simply as “to prepare” (typically a meal or an outfit) – not in any particular kind of “neat” way and not of a particularly delicate object. Thus, I.D.G. might have added the word “neatly” in his translation not because it was an implied adverb tacked on to “apprêter” but instead because he felt it necessary to provide a more thorough translation of La Varenne’s key term “delicatement.”

In sum, the meaning of “delicatement,” as understood in the English language, might have been complex enough to be considered two-fold: both dainty and neat. In early seventeenth-century English (1606), “dainty” was defined as involving the experience of “pleasure.” Whereas “neat” was defined as “fine,” synonymous to “exquisite” or “perfect.” It would then appear that what La Varenne had discovered was how to make the meat preparation process as well as its edible product aesthetically pleasing. He created a meat that was pleasurable to experience because of its “fine” sensorial qualities, not simply because it curbed one’s hunger. This novel attitude toward, and focus on the experience of, food would have been well worth emphasizing at the time. Indeed, Le Cuisinier François marked the peculiar debut of the “culinary arts.”

In sum, La Varenne rendered meat (apparently for the first official time): (i) an object that is to be meticulously prepared to perfection, as opposed to indifferently so and (ii) an object that is to be savored for the high-quality pleasure it brings, as opposed to gorged on purely for the sake of filling one’s stomach. We can thus reasonably assume that meat was widely considered to be an indelicate food item that
involved messy preparation until the mid-seventeenth century – at which time La Varenne unveiled his secret by way of his cookbook’s publication. Meat’s nature had been taken for granted: it had always been regarded as inherently cumbersome and difficult to work with. Such was its nature. From the domesticated animals of the peasants to the game of the nobility, one could not escape the bloody process of turning animal into edible. It would require the motivation and ingenuity of the world’s first “food artist,” the inventor of cuisine, to render this multiply problematic ingredient into the ultimate edible delicacy found at the center of French cuisine.

II. Meat’s Centrality in French Cuisine: To Eat French is to Eat Meat

Before we can claim that the transformation of meat – from bloody to beautiful – was Le Cuisinier François’ central theme, let us first find evidence that meat in general takes precedence over the French chef’s other ingredients, namely vegetables, fruits, and dairy. Following the “The French Cook” [in bold and in a very large font] a long subtitle follows, which begins: “teaching the manner to make ready well and season all sorts of Meats, fatty and lean, Vegetables, Pastries, and other dishes.” This implied “food hierarchy” (from meats to vegetables to pastries to “other dishes”) is reinforced in the 1653 English version, in which his “Meats” are introduced in their very own paragraph and in which “Herbs and Fruits” are introduced in a separate paragraph underneath. Meat also outshines plants and dairy in the opening table of contents, where recipes are sorted entirely based on whether or not meat is present.\footnote{The distinction between “flesh days” and “Lent” was no doubt due to the kingdom’s strict Catholicism rather than a personal choice made by La Varenne. The role of religion in shaping French society’s perception of meat is worthy of its own in-depth discussion. However, within the context of this thesis, I will only briefly consider this religious influence on La Varenne’s work. The Catholic}
percent of the food-based terms (as opposed to terms for cooking tools and techniques) involve meat. After the reader has flipped through the books various dedications, introductions, tables, and titles, the very first direction finally appears: “take knuckles of beef, the hinder part of the rump, a little of mutton, and some hens.” From these details (as well as what is to be outlined in later sections), we can surely conclude, and with confidence, that meat is indeed at the center of Le Cuisinier Francois. Thus, given the publication’s important historical and socio-political context (as outlined in Chapter 1), meat becomes the center of French cuisine as well as French identity. To eat French is to eat meat.

One must not, however, forget the all-important qualifier to the foregoing statement: to eat French, is to eat delicate meat. The theme of meat’s centrality in French cuisine combines perfectly with La Varenne’s delicate meat rendering in one crucial detail: bullion. The first recipe of the cookbook is one for a complex concoction of meat juices: a broth intended to be used for the making of all potages, forty-nine to be exact. In other words, the ingredient that is found most consistently in La Varenne’s dishes is meat in its most delicate, almost ethereal, form: a well-strained, thin, uniformly colored jus. It is made of an animal carcass so processed that the eater might not even recognize meat as being present in their dainty liquid! All

Church, especially in early Modern France, was enormously powerful and quite obsessive about their “meat consumptions rules.” Their distinguishing meat from other food items reinforces the idea that there is something special to be said about France’s attitude toward fleshy foods. Catholics chose not to eat meat during Lent for the sake of humbling themselves by rejecting indulgent food items. Importantly, prior to the invention of cuisine (which essentially invented “luxurious food”), meat would have been considered “indulgent” because it was expensive, reserved largely for royalty, and associated with celebratory feasting. In other words, prior to La Varrene’s work, meat was considered an indulgent item not because of its aesthetic value or “daintiness” but rather because it was not easily attainable. Nonetheless, this religious context only accentuates meat’s centrality to French cuisine and French identity.
signs of the once-living animal as well as their butchered body parts are disguised: the animal product is present but made invisible. All one is left to see is a delicate culinary innovation, whose ingredient-based origins are rendered anonymous.

III. From Bloody to Beautiful: Tracking the Transformation of Meat

Now that we have discerned the meaning of La Varenne’s curious statement regarding his “secret,” while also shedding some light on meat’s centrality in traditional French cuisine, we will consider whether the great chef’s discovery did in fact impact the way France (and the rest of the Western world) prepared and experienced meat. We will evaluate the publication’s effects when considered in the context of three distinct realms: psychology, language, and art. By looking at the “before” versus the “after” of the cookbook in each of these distinct realms, we should be able to identify some of the sociocultural changes that took place on account of the cookbook’s publication.

i. Psychological Effects of Delicate Meat

It has been established that animal-based food is more likely than plant-based food to be at risk for contamination with pathogens. This would help explain the common emotion of disgust (an instinct intended for protection) “within contexts of ‘dead bodies, rotting food, and bodily fluids.’” Meat’s origin undoubtedly lies in the context of decaying flesh, guts, blood, and other fluids – all of which the average modern human finds repulsive. Indeed, to say that unprocessed meat is unsightly is an understatement. It offends far more than our visual sense. An animal carcass soon begins to smell. However, such sensitivity to gore reflects today’s standards. Earlier

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82: How we present, prepare and talk about meat increases willingness to eat meat by reducing empathy and disgust,” *Appetite* (October 2016): 759.
generations would have been relatively desensitized to scenes of unprocessed meat, as such scenes were significantly more visible to the average consumer who might, for example, frequently pass by the village butcher shop. Indeed, the majority of medieval French meat eaters, not having private chefs or restaurants, had to directly engage with the animal bodies they consumed. Instincts would have encouraged people to approach their meat with caution as opposed to refusing it altogether.

Then along came seventeenth-century France, led by the shining Sun King, with its emphasis on aesthetics and cleanliness, searching to wipe out anything that might provoke even low-level “functional” disgust. La Varenne – in the spirit of maintaining France’s sterile image – transformed meat’s less-than-beautiful and purely-functional reputation into one that was decidedly “neat and dainty.” Thus, anything about meat suggestive of decay or disease was disguised. The instinctively known fact – that meat is prone to pathogenic and potentially harmful-to-human infection – has been largely forgotten throughout contemporary Western society. This “amnesia” is arguably a consequence of La Varenne’s “invention” of a new kind of meat: one that has been “pre-washed.”

This virtual “dormancy” of our meat-related instincts has been reinforced by several industries which have essentially capitalized on what La Varenne initiated in the seventeenth century. Consider the French inventions of the restaurant (eighteenth century) and of the abattoir (nineteenth century). The United States would also eventually profit from this trend with their invention of factory farming (twentieth century).

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83 Ibid., 759.
Each of these successive innovations filtered out more and more of the “icky” pathogenic-prone parts of meat. As other Western nations began to adopt La Varenne’s modern cuisine model, the aesthetics of their meat changed as well. As a result, today’s humans interact very little with meat that has not been professionally prepared; meat’s most “natural” characteristics have been disguised from (or at least significantly cleaned up for) its eater. Thus, our instinctive reaction to meat is no longer what it used to be – which is what it naturally should be.

ii. Linguistic Effects of Delicate Meat

There is also noteworthy linguistic evidence reflecting a change in France’s attitude toward, and understanding of, meat. It was a change so powerful that it altered the official definition of the word “meat” (“viande” in French) – the word La Varenne used to refer to his animal-based ingredients. Let us consider its “before and after” definitions:

a. Viande (1606): “That which man eats to live… But in the Court, we seem to restrain this word meat to the flesh which is served at the table, because we do not call meat dessert. Poor people’s meat, Cibus illiberalis. Meat of the previous day, Pridianus cibus. Meat dressed in soup, and cooked with its juice, Iurulentum opsonium. Meat well dressed and seasoned, Lautus cibus, Pulpamentum.”

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87 Regarding the former: restaurants sell food presentations and experiences, which has naturally led to their adoption of “pretty meat.” Regarding the latter: the modern meat industry, which primarily relies on factory farming, has dramatically limited the amount of pre-processed from entering society. Instead, supermarkets tend to sell sterile and highly processed meat.
88 “C’est ce dont l’homme se paist pour vivre… Mais en la Cour il semble qu’on ait reentrant ce mot viande à la chair qui est servie à table, car on n’appelle pas viande le dessert… Viandes à povres gens, Cibus illiberalis. Viande du jour de devant, Pridianus cibus. Toute viande accoustrée en potage, et
b. Viande (1694): “The flesh of terrestrial animals and of birds that we eat.

Sheep is a good meat. Deer meat is a coarse, melancholic, and has bad juice.

Delicious meat, delicate, exquisite, good meat, beautiful meat. Tender meat.

Fresh meat. Boiled meat, roasted, grilled, hot, cold.”

The striking differences in these definitions illustrate an attitudinal change regarding meat that occurred during the mid-seventeenth century. At the beginning of the century, “meat” meant food, any kind of food. It was what one ate to simply survive. This sentiment is reflected in the earlier definition’s first sample usage of the word, which involves the poor – those concerned with simply surviving. Perhaps most importantly, the 1606 dictionary’s author noted a change taking place in society. Among the upper class, “meat” was being used to refer specifically to “flesh.” So, before meat was called “meat,” meat was called “flesh.” Indeed, that is how we originally thought of it – for that is just what it is.

Of course, the meanings of words continually change overtime and usage varies from region to region. However, it is surely no coincidence that the date which falls exactly between the publication of these two definitions is 1650, just one year prior to the publication of Le Cuisinier François. By the end of the century, “flesh” had adopted the new and more delicate name “meat.” With meat’s previous meaning obsolete, French speakers were required to invent a new name for food in general and they did. In the same dictionary containing the updated definition of meat,
“nourriture” appeared for the first time: the new word for food. Not only did the definition of meat change but so did its sample usages. “Viande” no longer connoted mere survival but instead an object of indulgence: delicious, delicate, exquisite, and even beautiful. It thus appears La Varenne left his mark in the realm of language.

**iii. Artistic Effects of Delicate Meat**

In its new definition, meat is described as “beautiful” for the first time. In fact, many of its sample usages are overwhelming positive: “delicious meat, delicate, exquisite, good meat, beautiful meat.” The general attitude toward meat evidently changed from neutral (perhaps even slightly negative) to positive: from “poor people’s meat” and “meat of the previous day” to “exquisite” and “beautiful.” The French definition of beautiful (beau, belle), unlike that of “meat,” has not changed much at all overtime. In 1694, according to Larousse, the word meant “that which has the proportions and the mixture of colors necessary to please the eyes” and today, it means “that which arouses an aesthetic pleasure of visual or auditory order.” This indicates that during the mid-seventeenth century (between the publication of the two definitions) meat developed a new kind of aesthetic value, one beyond just “tasting pretty good.” In effect, meat had new potential in the realm of art: an area it had never entered before.

It is natural to assume that the author of the “Food Art Bible,” who placed meat at the center of that publication, would have played a pivotal role in conceiving meat as aesthetically pleasing for the first time. Societal conceptions of and attitudes

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90 Beau, belle: “Qui a les proportions & le meslange des couleurs necessaires pour plaire aux yeux” (Le Dictionnaire de l’Académie française 1694 t.2, 1694).
toward meat would change as the publication gained popularity throughout the Western world. It was essentially a glorified “how-to book” for transforming meat’s unsightly composition of blood and bones to a beautiful pink pâté (and hundreds of other beautiful dishes). *Le Cuisinier Francois* laid the groundwork for an entirely new field of artistic creation: one that favored knives and ovens over canvases and paintbrushes. This field of work was exhilaratingly new but came with more than a handful of challenges. This is because successful “food art” (also known as “gastronomy” or “cuisine”) engaged more than one’s sense of taste (like traditional food) and more than one’s sense of vision (like traditional art). This new art of cooking and eating also involved one’s touch, smell, and arguably even one’s hearing.92

Let us now explore the logistical challenges La Varenne faced as the first food artist, one who primarily engaged with meat, and how he went about addressing these challenges by employing his various techniques and tricks outlined the cookbook. Let us, in other words, unpack the details of this meat specialist’s “secret:” the secret of how to transform meat into something delicate. La Varenne’s “raw material” was the animal carcass (literally, raw meat), his artistry was the transformation of this raw material, and his artwork was the final product of this transformation. In order to legitimize his truly revolutionary idea that cooking could be viewed as an art, La Varenne shows throughout his cookbook that unprocessed, uncooked meat is only a raw material and must be transformed significantly by an

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92 Alain Passard, a respected contemporary 3-star chef in Paris who I will discuss in Chapter 3, claims that cuisine involves all five sense, including hearing, which primarily takes place in the kitchen – on the cutting boarding or stovetop, for example (“Alain Passard,” *Chef’s Table France*. Directed by David Gelb. 2016. Los Gastos, CA: Netflix.).
artist in order for it to become art. He often captures just how significant this transformation is by starting with the very first step. “Goose-making art,” for example, begins “as it comes from [her] mother” all the way to when she is “all well seasoned” and ready to “serve.”  

What is uniquely challenging for the food artist (as opposed to the paint artist) is that they must not only convince their audience to look at their art but also to taste, and even smell, their art. The job is doubly-difficult because paint as a raw material is simply unremarkable, whereas raw meat as a raw material is quite offensive. Thus, “meat artists” are required to complete a comparatively greater transformation (often through disguise) of their raw material. Conventionally, the painter need not disguise their paint, the architect need not disguise their bricks, and the sculptor need not disguise their clay but the cuisinier need indeed disguise their raw meat.

Just a few years prior to the cookbook’s publication, in 1647, two prominent French thinkers, Pierre Gassendi and René Descartes, were said to have agreed on the value of an herbivorous diet because raw meat is “instinctively repellent,” showing that “flesh is not our natural food, being only introduced by lust.”  

Even if not consciously aware of such attitudes, La Varenne, like most human beings, would likely have had the instinct of which Gassendi and Descartes speak. It is implied by his pride in having found the “secret” of how to make meat “neat and dainty.”

93 La Varenne, The French Cook, 69.
Varenne appears to have capitalized on the human emotions of lust and desire by transforming “repellent” raw and unprocessed meat into enticing pieces of neat and dainty artwork after which we would lust. This new way of experiencing meat was so desirous that it inspired Europeans to quickly publish many editions and translations of the *Le Cuisinier François*. In the first ten years of its initial publication, it was republished eighteen times and translated into at least English, German, and Italian. The demand was so high that ten of these publications were counterfeit. Everyone wanted to replace their “chair” with “viande.”

We can conclude that La Varenne not only changed but *revolutionized* the way France (and eventually the rest of the Western world) prepared and experienced meat. For most of contemporary Western society, any qualities that might imply the presence of pathogens, bacteria, or decay are stripped away well before meat is neatly displayed at the grocery store. The word “meat” no longer invokes the thought of “flesh” but instead has become increasingly abstract: that is, abstracted away from its original source: an animal carcass. Lastly, the normalization of food as involving “presentation,” food service as involving “atmosphere,” and the existence of and respect for “culinary studies” indicates that meat (and other foods) can indeed be viewed as artwork.

Let us now explore the variety of specific techniques La Varenne employed – techniques he conceptualized and branded as being distinctively French. Indeed, the title of his book is not “The Cook” but rather “The French Cook.” Let us unpack the intimate details of this meat specialist’s “secret:” how to make meat delicate. Keeping

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95 Hyman, *introduction to The French Cook*, vii.
in mind what we have learned thus far – particularly the precise meaning of La Varenne’s key statement as well as the ways in which meat transformed during the mid-seventeenth century – we will aim to understand how the details of *Le Cuisinier François* contributed to Europe’s, and especially France’s, tendency to:

i. View meat as being “neat” (“fine” or “perfect”) as opposed to messy or cumbersome

ii. Disguise meat’s pathogenic susceptibility (apparent in its raw and unprocessed state)

iii. Conceive of meat as “beautiful” as opposed to “ugly”

iv. Conceive of meat as “artistic” or “aesthetically pleasing” as opposed to a simple means of survival

**IV. The “Secret” Transformation: From Raw Material to Delicacy**

We have laid out a variety of factors that would have motivated La Varenne to make his meat-centric dishes aesthetically pleasing. We have also confirmed that the concept of meat did indeed change, and significantly so, during the mid-seventeenth century. Let us now seek to understand exactly *how* La Varenne managed to transform unprocessed meat into refined “dainties” by way of his cookbook’s meticulously orchestrated recipes.

A central motif of *Le Cuisinier François* is *cleanliness*, undoubtedly an important aspect of France’s new reputation. It is unsurprising that cleanliness appears as a foundational component in La Varenne’s “meaty” recipes, given that a central aim is to render meat neat and immaculate. One should not even attempt make meat beautiful or to transform it into a piece of art until it has been thoroughly
cleaned. “Dirty” surely does not fit the conventional sense of something that is aesthetically pleasing. La Varenne often directs his readers not only to “nettoyez” (translated as “cleanse” in the earliest English version) but to “bien nettoyez” (“cleanse well”). Indeed, the first line in each of the first four recipes of the book directs the reader to “cleanse” their meat.96

Another reoccurring word we come across in the cookbook is “blanchie” (translated as “whitened” in the earliest English version). Nearly all meat found in Le Cuisinier François is made “bien blanchie” before it is served or further prepared. This culinary technique, as defined by La Varenne, involves placing the meat in a boiling bath of water or broth until it turns white.97 The color white has long been associated with cleanliness and purity – particularly within the Catholic church, an especially strong force in France during the time of Le Cuisinier François’ 1651 publication. Only a few centuries following the establishment of the Catholic church, white became considered “the colour of highest dignity,”98 reports Clapton Rolfe in The Ancient Use of Liturgical Colors. White was described as the color of “purity” as early as 1198 in Pope Innocent III’s treatise De sacro altaris mysterio.99 Thus, the effect of the cookbook’s multitude of “white meats” (or, at least of meats whiter than they would appear as raw) would convey a general sense of cleanliness or purity. Even the whitest of meats, however, might still pose aesthetic problems. For example, such meats might not be symmetrical, uniformly white, or entirely free of marks or blemishes.

96 La Varenne, The French Cook, 21-22.
97 Ibid., 21.
In such cases, opaque liquids become helpful in disguising such imperfections: the chef simply “drowns” any aesthetic issues in a bath of liquid. The importance of such liquids is made clear in La Varenne’s very first recipe – one that serves as almost a kind of preface to the many recipes that follow. It is the recipe for his special broth: “the manner of making the broth for the feeding of all Po.s, be it of Potage, first course or intercourse (middle service).”\textsuperscript{100} It calls for a wide variety of meats and a bundle of herbs to be boiled in water for a long time. This “bathing” process is indeed thorough: even as the soup evaporates, you must “always [keep] some warm water ready to fill up the pot again.”\textsuperscript{101} Eventually, this concoction is finely strained and used as the base for nearly a third of La Varenne’s meat-centric dishes, particularly his many “potages” (essentially soup).

The use of liquids (i.e., broth, juice, sauce, stews) as tool to disguise imperfect meat was explicitly endorsed by La Varenne himself: “ferez la par tranches, que vous pourrez déguiser en plufieurs façons de ragousts”\textsuperscript{102} (“You may serve the [head of wild boar] in slices, which you may disguise with several sorts of ragouts”\textsuperscript{103}). Disguising meat by using “crums of bread” would appear to work just as well. According to the revolutionary chef, the result is a “dainty” product: “And to the end that your Achis be the more dainty, put it in a little crums of bread and new butter.”

La Varenne even advocates for a method of disguising so extreme that the eater be

\textsuperscript{100} La Varenne, \emph{The French Cook}, 19.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{102} La Varenne, \emph{Le Cuisinier François} (1651), 138.
\textsuperscript{103} La Varenne, \emph{The French Cook}, 101.
tricked into believing that they are consuming something different than what the dish truly is: “You may disguise [the domestic pork] near hand like the Boare.”

The theme of disguise appears just as central to Le Cuisinier François as the theme of cleanliness. In an effort to better understand the details of La Varenne’s “meat disguising” process, I have coded all three hundred and eight of his meat-centric recipes and categorized them in terms of whether or not they are “disguised.” I define “meat-centric recipes” as all those found in the potage, first course, and second course sections as well as nearly sixty percent of the middle course section. I exclude all recipes found in “lean” or “Lent” sections as well as any recipes involving primarily fish (not considered “meat” by La Varenne’s audience), eggs, or vegetables. I define and categorize meat as being “disguised” in the sense of its being “hidden” or “significantly processed.” “Hidden meat” implies being immersed in liquid, covered in sauce or flour, or sprinkled with significant amounts of garnish. “Significantly processed meat” implies being sliced thin, minced, or cut up and mixed about with other ingredients. A recipe that does conform to either of these descriptions would be considered “undisguised.”

After categorizing each of the three hundred and eight meat-centric recipes, I found that ninety-six percent were disguised (sixty-five percent being “hidden” and thirty-one percent being “significantly processed”). Thus, only a mere four percent of La Varenne’s meat is “undisguised.” Truly traditional French food thus greatly restricts the eater from seeing meat’s true nature: one that is uncovered and intact.

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104 La Varenne, The French Cook, 73.
105 Although meat does appear in other sections of the book, I have chosen to focus on those sections in which meat is the primary ingredient.
Let us now consider some examples of these two crucial forms of disguise, beginning with the “hiding” of meat. Though all recipes vary in the degree to which their meats are hidden, nearly every one (including those in the second category of “significantly processed”) involves garnishing. Flowers, leaves, and lemon slices are not uncommon to find sprinkled atop a slice of meat. Below we see a few specific examples of common techniques used for “hiding” meat:

(i) Potage of Pullets with Sparagus: “Garnish it with your pullets, with sparagus fried and broken, mushrums, combes, or with the giblets of your pullets, with a few pistaches and juice of mutton, and garnish the brim of your dish with lemon, then serve.”\(^{106}\)

(ii) Loin of mutton with ragoust: “Take it up, flowre it, and pass it in the pan. Then put it into an earthen pan with good broth and season it well with mushrums, capers, beef palats; cover it and let it seeth well, then serve.”\(^{107}\)

(iii) Loin of Veal with Pickle: “When it is rosted, stove it in the sauce, which you shall thicken with Chippings or clean flowre alayed with Broth, and shall Garnish your dish with Mushrums, Beef palats or Sparagus, then serve.”\(^{108}\)

(iv) Ducks with Ragoust: “Seeth them swell, and garnish with what you shall find to come nearest to the colour, then serve.”\(^{109}\)

\(^{106}\) La Varenne, *The French Cook*, 22.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 42.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 43.
In the first example, the “pullet” (chicken) is disguised in a soup along with several other “distracting” ingredients. Examples ii and iii call for flour and sauce, respectively, to cover the meat. The final example reveals that the act of disguising as well as aesthetic creation more broadly is indeed conscious for La Varenne. He instructs the chef-in-training to garnish their duck soup with something of the nearest color (literally camouflaging it), as opposed to something that might complement the flavor or that is in season. Aesthetics would seem to go hand-in-hand with disguise.

Let us now move onto dishes containing meat that is “significantly processed.” Throughout the cookbook, we come across expressions like “cut it very small,”110 “cut it into small slices,”111 or “mince it very small.”112 Nearly all meat processing is done meticulously. The following examples epitomize the relationship between high-level processing and disguise.

(v) Jacobin’s potage with cheese: “You shall make [from your Capon] as many beads of flesh, and you shall besprinkle all with almond broth… garnish with pistaches, lemons or pomegranates, then serve.”113

(vi) Princess’s Potage: “Stove your loaf of bread with the crust, and after a final hash of Partridges, which you shall strew upon your Bread, so thin as it may not appeare… garnish it with the smallest Mushrums, Combes, Stones, or Kidneys, Pistaches, Lemon, and much juice, then serve.”114

110 Ibid., 52.
111 Ibid., 53.
112 Ibid., 44.
113 Ibid., 34.
114 Ibid., 25.
(vii) The Queen’s Potage: “When you have taken the bones out of some rosted partridge or capon, take the bones and beat them well in a mortar [and create a broth from this]... Then put into it a little of some very small hash, be it of partridge or of capon, and alwayes as it doth stove, put in it some almond broth until it be full.”

Each of these recipes, in their own unique way, either reshapes, minces, or grinds meat to such an extent that the eater would no longer recognize what is served on their plate as meat – that is, as something that even remotely resembles an animal body. The eater would not find any hint of flesh, blood, or bones despite the ironic fact that the very essence of these culinary products is made from pure flesh, blood, and bones. Despite their being called “beads of flesh,” naturally occurring flesh simply does not take the form of beads and so in this form, they would not resemble flesh. In Princess’s Potage, the hash of partridges is spread so thin that the eater does not even see it! In the Queen’s Potage, a central ingredient, bones, are ground to the point of invisibility. It would therefore appear that significantly processing animal products disguises their “animalness” just as much as covering them with sauce or drowning them in soup.

A final and less obvious way in which La Varenne disguises the “meatiness” of his meat dishes involves his effective distorting of the product source: whether the respective meat comes from a pig, a cow, or a hen. He does this by “mixing” several animals together, thereby rendering the dishes origin inherently ambiguous. Consider the following examples of such tactics:

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115 Ibid., 24.
(i) Broth: “Take knuckles of beef, the hinder part of the rump, a little of mutton, and some hens, according to the quantity of broth that you will have, put in meat proportionably.”\(^{116}\)

(ii) “Take out the flesh, which you shall mince with suet and some little of Veal-flesh, which you shall mix together with yolks of Eggs & young Pigeons, & all being well seasoned; you shall fill your Turkie with it”\(^{117}\)

Notice the direction, “put in meat proportionably.” The resulting flavor of the broth would be evenly split among a cow, a sheep, and a hen: three distinct animal flavors fade away into an ambiguous hybrid flavor. This nifty tactic, despite its popularity, would be criticized by the famous French writer, Voltaire, a few decades after the cookbook’s publication. According to restaurant historian, Rebecca Spang, Voltaire criticized modern cooks for combining “turkey, hare, and rabbit, which they want me to think is all one meat.”\(^{118}\)

The second example represents one of many instances of a “farced” meat: a meat that is disemboweled and neatly stitched up with neater, cleaner, and decidedly “daintier” insides generally featuring other animal parts. Such dishes not only disguise the source(s) of the meat but also refine their naturally unrefined anatomy. Recall that the perception of meat, prior to *Le Cuisinier François*, was one that was far from neat and dainty. Organs make vivid the difficulty of working with meat as a raw material: they are slimy, oddly textured, mangled about, and otherwise naturally repulsive. La Varenne adopts a solution to this problem: he simply pulls out these

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., 41.
\(^{118}\) Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant*, 45.
organs, finely minces them into a hash, combines this hash with other minced meat and scent-curing herbs or spices and then uses this new comparatively dainty product to replace the messy organs that were once there. As the eater cuts into their perfectly stitched-up pig – appearing as though it had never been butchered – they find a beautifully textured and colored anatomy. Those unfamiliar with such culinary techniques might even have believed that this was natural anatomy of the animal. The eater is made to believe that their animal-based food is naturally beautiful.

La Varenne is not only a meat magician but also a perfectionist, a stereotype that still holds true for the French today. Nearly all acts performed by the food artist shall be acts of perfection, neatness, and finesse. The French word “bien” is found everywhere when describing meat preparation: “cleanse them well,” “seeth it well,” “well trussed up,” “stuff it very well.” It seems that the most gruesome processes are those that receive the most attention: “Take up the skin very neatly,”119 “Garnish it with the small ends of Wings without bones at one end,”120 “Take the guts of mutton and scrape them so that they be very clear.”121 One of the most intricate recipes, Potage of a Calfe’s head farced without bones, requires quite the careful hand: “Take out the brains and the eyes for to set them in their place again… When it is farced, sow it neatly up again”122 Importantly, these instances in which meat dishes were less covered or processed, La Varenne provides especially meticulous directions regarding their preparation. If one pursues the creation of a food art involving a calf’s

119 La Varenne, The French Cook, 36.
120 Ibid., 25.
121 Ibid., 43.
122 Ibid., 36.
head, one must ensure that it stays intact and clean. One mushy eyeball simply will not do.

Clearly, the processes by which La Varenne sought to transform meat from often unsightly raw material to something neat and dainty, were incredibly complex. He would therefore need a correspondingly complex language to convey these processes to his audience.

V. A New Language for a New Concept: Meat as “Neat and Dainty”

La Varenne devised an entirely new and remarkably rich vocabulary to create the impression that real *finesse* was essential to the art of the French Chef – an art that was no different in sophistication or cultural importance than great music, architecture, or painting.

For La Varenne, a new cuisine involved a new *language*, a new way of speaking about food. “Capon with Tailladin and all other meat is done the same way, and being made ready this, *it shall be called* such meat with Tailladin”\textsuperscript{123} (my emphasis). Throughout his revolutionary cookbook, La Varenne tells his readers how they should refer to each dish. There is not a single dish one serves without a proper name. Each name is presented in italics, indicating that it is not a mere description but rather an actual name or title – from “Princess’s Potage” to “Fat Hen.”\textsuperscript{124} *Haute cuisine* indeed.

The name La Varenne gives each dish indicates which ingredients (among the many) shall be emphasized and thus made the focus of discussion at the dinner

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 57, 76.
These food titles would become an important “ingredient” in French food performance. There are no “little somethings” that a French cook might simply “throw together.” French food is emphatically not casual; it sits high upon a pedestal and is always worthy of a suitably dignified name. As one contemporary French food historian describes this phenomenon, so evident in Le Cuisinier Français: “In France we do not only eat food, we savor it, we talk and sing about it, we philosophize about its meaning in life.”

In addition to the creation of a name for each of his special dishes, La Varenne devises a set of words used to refer to the cooking techniques and inventions unique to his kingdom. This vocabulary was so expansive that I.D.G. found it necessary to introduce and organize it. The cookbook’s second section, the “Table of Hard Words,” provides a list of definitions for untranslatable words or concepts unfamiliar to the English speaker. Nearly three quarters of these words relate to the different kinds of, or preparations of, meat. La Varenne instructs his readers on how to process, decorate, or disguise his animal-based foods. As noted earlier, in Medieval Europe, “butchers [had] low social status because they deal with animals’ dead bodies.” La Varenne was now attempting to elevate and indeed beautify the “lowly” practice of animal butchery by way of a host of fanciful words used to describe the tasks involved in such butchery. La Varenne, through a novel, rich and bourgeois

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125 The dining room and its dinner table were also a nifty French invention of the seventeenth century, popularized in some part by the publication of Le Cuisinier Français (Melissa Wittmeier, “The Art of the Table in Eighteenth-Century France,” Journal of The Western Society for French History 28, 2010), 5-6).
127 Susan Crane, Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain, 118.
“language of meat,” ingeniously disguises and dignifies the innately disgusting practice of animal butchery.

The importance of La Varenne’s new “meat vocabulary” is three-fold: (i) his “neat and clean” words replace what would have been rather messy and unwieldy descriptions, (ii) his highly technical vocabulary, the first-ever “cuisine jargon,” has the effect of turning animal butchery into a fine art, requiring real skill and finesse, and (iii) from the perspective of non-French speakers, the “untranslatable words” become their own kind of vocabulary, embodying an exoticism that has the effect of mystifying ordinary and, in fact, decidedly unappetizing meat rendering practices and procedures.

Of the forty-five words listed in the Table of Hard Words, twenty-two concern meat and only ten regard vegetables (or dairy). The other thirteen concern cooking tools or techniques that could apply to either meat or vegetables.\(^\text{128}\) It is clear that types of meat or meat-specific preparations dominate the realm of unfamiliar concepts, even more so than general cooking techniques (like special forms of boiling or frying). This imbalance suggests that there is a reason for describing meat-related items or activities in a special way. Such items and activities require something other than a description composed of “ordinary” words, because countless such words would be required to describe, for example, the practice of disembowelment. Thus, in order to adhere to the French standards of refinement, meat-related concepts – found at the center of French cuisine – were in need of simplification.

La Varenne was an expert in synthesizing a “messy” description into one

simple and “neat” word. Indicated by the sheer number of related vocabulary words, it would appear that meat is given special attention for this very reason. Bloody, gutty, gory descriptions are “cleaned up” with a single word. Moreover, these single words are often unfamiliar to the reader. They thus arguably serve as abstract, “neutral” symbols for the real “aesthetically-charged” butchering processes. Consider the following examples from I.D.G’s Table of Hard Words:

i. “Abbatis or Abatis... the purtenances of any beast… the feet, the ears, the toungue… also the giblets of any fowl… the neck, wings, feet, gisard, liver.”

ii. “Andouilles… the great guts of pork, or beef, filled up with thick slices of tender meat, or small guts of pork.”

iii. Beatilles of pullets… the giblets [the liver, heart, gizzard, and neck of a chicken^129]”

iv. Barbillons… the second skin of the palats of beef.”

Each of these terms replaces lengthier descriptions of “ordinary” (i.e. familiar) and connotatively negative words, like “organs” and “skin.”

Once the reader learns and adopts this vocabulary, they are capable of referring to disgusting, fleshy, products entirely in a roundabout way (which is quite a disturbing phenomenon). This linguistic distancing allows the reader to inure themselves to the gore inherently involved in meat-centric cuisine and to design their own idealized, aesthetically-pleasing, concept of the activity in which they are engaging. This is particularly true for “coffee table” readers engaged purely with the

language, but these ideas are transferrable to the actual practice of cooking as well.

Consider, for example, how one might describe a dish preparation without La Varenne’s culinary jargon: one slices open the stomach of a young pig causing it to gush with blood, removes its various organs and bones, chops up a variety of these body parts into tiny pieces – a gushy and gory process, and then finishes by stuffing this minced flesh into the animal’s hollow body. In addition to these intense visuals, the chef intimately engages in this hands-on process. Indeed, La Varenne directs his reader to “take up the skin of them with the finger.”\(^{130}\) Now, consider what the cook might tell themselves as they perform these acts with some assistance from “Varennian” culinary jargon: I simply remove the abbatis, produce a hash with the necessary ingredients, and finish by farcing the dish. How delightful and sophisticated that sounds! If I were preparing this “dish,” I would much prefer the latter description to occupy my internal thoughts as I “take up the skin of them with my finger.”

The second “aestheticization” aspect of Le Cuisinier François’ new vocabulary involves La Varenne’s usage of highly technical language. The 1653 English translator took note of La Varenne’s various terms for highly specific instances. In his Table of Hard Words, I.D.G. provides not one definition regarding lard but instead five: lard, lardons, to lard, mean lard, and great lard.\(^{131}\) Apparently, for a seventeenth-century person to claim to be knowledgeable about haute cuisine, it would be reasonable to expect that they know the proper terms for each one of lard’s potential forms: in “small long slices” (lardons), in slices of a “middle sise” (mean

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\(^{130}\) La Varenne, The French Cook, 35.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 16.
lard), and in “big slices” (great lard). This individual would have also known the difference between lard as a noun and lard as a verb – a differentiation so apparently important that I.D.G. felt it necessary to make explicit.

It would be a mistake to think that La Varenne’s rich culinary vocabulary reflected mere pedantry on the chef’s part. On the contrary, he very reasonably assumed that precision in the language of meat preparation and presentation was essential in order to capture the very real distinctions of which a true French chef should be aware. Here, we encounter again another parallel between the food artist and the painter. Just as there is frottage, gouache, and grading for the painter, there is andouillets, arbolade, and chapiteau for the French chef. Every art form needs its own distinctive vocabulary so as to capture the nuances unique to that art form.

Indeed, this aspect of linguistic technicality that surrounds the art of French cuisine is present throughout the book in the various tables of contents. For example, there is not one core recipe for gelee (“jus de viande” – meat juice) featuring brief notes describing subtle variations of the dish, but rather seven separately titled sections for each variation: gelee, gelee of Harts horn, green gelee, red gelee, yellow gelee, gelee of coulour of Violets, and blew gelee. These dishes are all very much similar, especially those concerning the color of the dish. La Varenne wrote as descriptions for the yellow, violet, and blue jelly as “same,” “same,” and “also same,” respectively. Each of these recipes bared titles nearly as long as their descriptions. I.D.G. recognized this as superfluous and instead wrote as a note under the red jelly recipe, “In the like manner you may make Gelee yellow, violet, and blue.”

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132 Ibid., 88.
This alteration of I.D.G.’s might indicate a subtle yet important difference between English culinary attitudes versus French culinary attitudes. La Varenne’s decision to have a title, a proper name, for each jelly variation implies that blue geleee should not technically be referred to as “gelee made like all the other gelees but with instead with blue coloring.” Instead, the correct terminology would be “Blue Gelee.” Like the meat-centric vocabulary laid out in the Table of Hard Words, these details also promote “neat and simple” descriptions and avoid unnecessarily prolix and unrefined descriptions. Thus, La Varenne might have defended his (ironically) superfluous titles by claiming that they ultimately maintained an overall tidy structure.

This abundance of highly specific terminology amounts to culinary jargon, the first ever culinary jargon. Like other arts, the art of cuisine required its own jargon. That is, it required “special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand” (my emphasis). The meaning of “jargon” is reminiscent of the meaning of “code:” “a system of words, letters, figures, or symbols used to represent others, especially for the purposes of secrecy” (my emphasis). Thus, perhaps one purpose of the French chef’s abundant jargon was to intimate a kind of secrecy. After all, this “special” (and indeed specialized) language surely helped conceal (or “make secret”) the unsightly reality of the French chef’s “raw material.” This is not, of course, to deny that the central purpose of the language of French cuisine would have been to reflect the precision and knowledge needed to be a true French chef. The point here is a modest one: the chef’s fine (and indeed

“refined”) language no doubt made the decidedly “un-fine” processing and preparation of meat appear to involve real artistry rather than mere butchery.

The second most common definition of code is: “a phrase or concept used to represent another in an indirect way.”\(^\text{135}\) This second definition also reflects the situation of Le Cuisinier François’ readers: they have learned the secrets of the culinary world, but they are able to refer to these secrets in indirect ways – a useful tool (as explained in section ii. of IV). Perhaps this second definition of “code” is more relevant than the first to La Varenne’s readers, but this is not to say that the first is irrelevant (as should be clear from the preceding discussion).

VI. “Untranslatable Words:” Creating Distance through Abstraction

There is a final linguistic element of Le Cuisinier François that enables – and indeed encourages – the reader to conceive of intrinsically unsightly meat as neat and dainty, and of cooking as an art form. However, this element is present only from the perspective of the non-French speaker reading La Varenne’s cookbook – of which there were many.

The cookbook’s abundance of “untranslatable words” is of some psychological significance. The first person who attempted to translate the book (into English), I.D.G., reports the following in his introduction: “As concerning some few words which are not Englished, they are words of things which are not in England, or some words of art, which you will find explained in a Table set before the book.”

Despite the English speaker’s inability to translate – and arguably to fully comprehend – a number of French food words, I.D.G. proclaims that the cookbook

\(^{135}\) Ibid.
will nonetheless be useful “wheresoever the English tongue is used.”

The pervasiveness of these untranslatable words is clear today in the anglicization of many French terms, where the original untranslated word is “imported” into another language. Consider the English words “restaurant” and “menu.” In the case of La Varenne’s cookbook, the effect of so many important, yet untranslatable, words would likely result in a mystified, and even mysterious, view of meat and its preparation, particularly for non-French speaking readers. This might have distorted and exoticized the process of meat preparing and even meat eating itself. One would “go through the motions” of preparing and eating meat, yet without knowing exactly what one was doing and with what. One would be cooking and eating unreflectively and thus with disgust-free and guilt-free pleasure.
Chapter 3
“Unsolving” the “Problem of Meat” and Unveiling Meat’s True Nature

I. The Historic Problem of Meat and its Contemporary Counterpart

The task of making meat beautiful – and beautiful according to France’s “leader in luxury” standards – requires a particular kind of knowledge and skill. Indeed, given that so much effort was involved in this transformation – ten years of hard work according to La Varenne – meat must be an especially challenging item to work with (compared to vegetables or dairy) from the food artist’s perspective. The birth of gastronomy (the “food revolution” with which La Varenne is most often credited\textsuperscript{136}) problematized meat for the first time: that is, it required that this unsightly object be made beautiful: dainty, and delicate. Importantly, meat had never been regarded as beautiful, a fact that became significant only with the arrival of French cuisine. This historic\textsuperscript{137} problem of meat, an aesthetic problem, led to its contemporary counterpart, an epistemic problem: society’s forgetting that meat was ever other than aesthetically pleasing. More precisely, the fact that the historic (and aesthetic) problem was solved, and solved to such great effect, led to the contemporary epistemic problem: a kind of collective amnesia regarding the decidedly unsightly and indeed gruesome origins of meat that has been miraculously transformed into something regarded as beautiful: something “neat” and “dainty.”

The average member of contemporary Western society is unfamiliar with the details of the history of meat rendering. Although this is certainly no surprise, why


\textsuperscript{137} The problem is marked as historic because it effectively marked the beginning of French cuisine.
have those who study cuisine or French history not discussed this problem, or even mentioned it? Why have experts on La Varenne and his cuisine neglected to address the most central component of his masterpiece: “les viandes”?

Ironically, this “blind spot” in research may well be a byproduct of exactly what La Varenne set out to do: normalize and “beautify” meat processing and consuming. One might surmise that the scholarly lacuna with regard to the meat-centric theme of *Le Cuisinier François*, and effectively the whole of French gastronomy, is evidence of La Varenne’s lasting success. Today, most culinary scholars, fine food experts, and dedicated chefs consider the preparing of animal bodies to be a necessary part of the beatification process – something that is not questioned, given that it is *required* if one wishes the final product to be the “pièce de résistance.” This expression, which is used to describe both art and cuisine,\(^{138}\) is literally translated as “the piece of resistance:” that which has “staying power,” an essential feature of a true classic.\(^{139}\)

This “beautification” of meat, achieved today through extensive processing, has led to widespread unreflective meat consumption. Such unreflective consumption is continually promoted by the modern meat industry: so as to keep people eating meat without questioning just what exactly it is that they are eating. As noted above, this problem is the contemporary counterpart to the problem of meat, a problem which La Varenne so ably solved. His solution worked so well that his successors more or less followed it with the end result that contemporary consumers of meat don’t really know what they are eating – other than, perhaps, that it is (or “came

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\(^{138}\) “Pièce de résistance,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

\(^{139}\) For details, see the discussion of what makes a classic in Chapter 1.
from”) an animal of a certain kind.

Renaissance France “invented” and then normalized this distancing of the meat eater from the unprocessed animal carcass they consume. *Le Cuisinier François* effectively became the “guidebook” for three enormously powerful industries that rely on this distancing: restaurants (that sell meat), slaughterhouses, and factory farms. This contemporary counterpart to La Varenne’s aesthetic problem is, again, an epistemic one: we no longer see, and thus no longer know, meat’s true nature: pathogenic-prone, fleshy, and ugly.

Ironically, if we are to solve the contemporary epistemic problem of meat we have to “unsolve” the historically aesthetic problem of meat: we must remind meat eaters of meat’s grisly origin – for the sake of animals, the environment, our own health, and for truth itself. We must, in other words, remove meat’s “neat and dainty” disguise, so cleverly invented by La Varenne three and a half centuries ago. We must, in effect, force people to look at, and think about, what it is they are eating when they eat meat.

This common “dissociation” of meat from its origin has been long recognized by vegan and vegetarian scholars and advocates. However, it has just begun to be studied by psychologists.\(^{140}\) In the following section, we will consider what these studies reveal about the details of dissociation. But first, let us review the various terms and concepts introduced in the previous chapter, which help define and situate the aesthetic problem of meat:

Meat had never been regarded as beautiful and this fact only became significant with the arrival of French cuisine.

In the seventeenth century, The Kingdom of France (Louis XIV) wanted everything, including its food, to be beautiful. Meat was not beautiful. This was a problem for which a solution was needed; meat was thus problematized.

La Varenne, through his royally-sponsored publication *Le Cuisinier François*, successfully addressed this issue. The aesthetic problem with meat was virtually solved at the same time it was posed, as *Le Cuisinier François* was published in the midst of France’s reputation-building.

Modern meat industries throughout the Western world have normalized beautiful meat. Thus, meat is considered “normally” free of unsightly characteristics.

“The contemporary (and epistemic) problem of meat:” Over the past three-and-a-half centuries, society has increasingly forgotten meat’s unattractive characteristics. (As an effect, society has likely lost its desensitization to scenes of unprocessed meat.)

“Unsolving” the historic (and aesthetic) problem of meat: This would entail successfully reminding meat eaters about their meat’s origin: one that is fleshly, bloody, and boney. This “unsolving” of the historic problem of meat would result in the solving of the contemporary problem of meat.
II. The Absent Referent: The Animal or the Gore?

The body of a dead animal, a carcass, is most naturally perceived as something that is unsightly, gruesome, or upsetting. It is therefore unsurprising that what La Varenne describes as his great “secret” is the means of transforming this patently distasteful item into something that is delicate and even luxurious. Through his meticulous preparation process, he manages to insert a kind of cognitive gap between the animal carcass and the delicious food it eventually becomes.

This tactic (distancing the animal from the “food” on one’s plate) has received much attention and criticism within contemporary vegan and animal rights communities. Today, we hear many vegan scholars and activists express grave concern about the lies and half-truths the meat industry tells consumers. This industry has become an expert in the creation of what Carol Adams, a respected figure among the vegan community, calls the “absent referent” in her famous 1990 book: “The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory.” According to Adams,

The “absent referent” is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product [meat]. The function of the absent referent is to keep our “meat” separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the “moo” or “cluck” or “baa” away from the meat, to keep something from being seen as having been someone. Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to
become that “meat,” meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal).\textsuperscript{141}

Indeed, contemporary marketing and packaging strategies successfully disconnect the meat eater from the reality of the meat’s origin: full of violence, suffering, blood, guts, and other “not-so-delicate” details that involve a “someone.” Today, the average meat eater is presented with pretty pieces of soft pink ham or a smooth oval-shaped and golden-hued roast (as opposed to a “pig”) in sterile plastic packages. These displays resemble nothing remotely like the bloody and boney butchered body of an animal.

Some of these packages do, however, feature the image of an animal who is still very much alive.\textsuperscript{142} It is also not uncommon to see advertisements for chicken or beef involving lively animals, sometimes even anthropomorphized and talking to the consumer. Consider Chick-fil-A’s well-know and long-running marketing campaign, which involves humorous attempts by clever cows to outsmart consumers into eating chicken rather than beef.\textsuperscript{143} It would thus appear that successful tactics for selling animal products do not always involve keeping “our ‘meat’ separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal” – contrary to what Carol Adams suggests.

According to Adams’ “absent referent,” the main concern of meat eaters would involve the association of the meat they consume with the live animal it once

\textsuperscript{142} Boar’s Head, a high-quality meat and cheese provider, is known for their logo: the head of a live boar.
\textsuperscript{143} In 1995, The Richard’s Group invented the chain’s most popular advertising slogan: “Eat Mor Chickin” (Katie Richards, “Chicken With a Beef: The Untold Story of Chick-fil-A’s Cow Campaign,” \textit{Adweek}, June 17, 2016).
was, one who once endearingly “mooed” or “clucked.” ¹⁴⁴ Having such an association made explicit to them, whether through words or images, would likely stir their respective consciences, making them think twice about eating meat. As Adams explains, “the absent referent functions to cloak the violence inherent to meat eating, to protect the conscience of the meat eater and render the idea of individual animals as immaterial to anyone’s selfish desires.” ¹⁴⁵

Although a kind of dormant guilt is likely a component of the modern meat eaters’ psyche (especially three-and-a-half centuries after society began losing its desensitization to scenes of animal slaughter¹⁴⁶), I suspect there might be another, more powerful, emotion that is operative here. That emotion, one with which we are all familiar, is disgust – hardly the sort of reaction one would expect to something that is “neat and dainty.” Disgust goes by many different names: aversion, distaste, revulsion, repugnance. It was an emotion of which La Varenne was surely aware. Indeed, it would appear that many of his culinary techniques were designed to suppress it.¹⁴⁷ This instinctive and gustatory reaction was effectively rendered impotent by Le Cuisinier François and the culinary norms it created (as alluded to in previous sections). France, in order to promote a new national image of luxury and sophistication, would surely need to first address this “problem of meat:” how to disguise the aesthetically problematic nature of meat: its unsightly appearance, its

¹⁴⁴ Carol Adams, The Sexual Politics of Meat, xxiv.
¹⁴⁶ This point explained earlier in Section III i: “The Psychological Effects of Delicate Meat.”
¹⁴⁷ Such techniques will be explored in later sections.
smell, its fleshy and sinewy texture. Symbols of disgust could not be more at odds with the image toward which France was aspiring.

III. An Overlooked Phenomenon: The Dying Animal

As Carol Adams has pointed out to me (p.c.), there are “at least three aspects, not two, in [my analysis of the absent referent]: there is the living animal, the dead animal, and the dying animal – the animal being killed.” I completely agree with Adams on this point and would suggest that the first and third of these, the living and the dying animal, involve moral issues. These issues might be resolved, at least in principle, by not objectifying animals in the first place. Empathy would then be possible and would naturally be elicited by both: (i) images (or thoughts) of the beautiful and once-living animal (now being eaten) and (ii) images (or thoughts) of the animal as it is being brutally killed. These feelings of empathy would likely result in a special kind of disgust, as Adams pointed out to me.\textsuperscript{148} It would be a moral disgust with regard to how we treat, how we dispense with, the dying animal who is to become our food. This is all very interesting and important in connection with promoting the vegan cause.

My concern in this thesis, however, is exclusively with what might be called “gustatory” or “aesthetic” disgust, disgust which is completely devoid of any sort of moral implications. It is the existence of the dying animal that arguably marks the transition from moral disgust to aesthetic disgust. This latter “aesthetic” disgust would involve the dead animal (which can no longer experience anxiety, pain, or suffering), as opposed to the living or dying animal. Although I agree with Adams

\textsuperscript{148} I have had personal contact with Carol Adams through several of email exchanges.
that our natural reaction to the killing and subsequent butchering of the animal (in the absence of objectification) might be something like “How wrong!” I also think that another, equally natural, and arguably more widespread reaction to such slaughter might be something like ‘How gross!’ In short, I believe that the “moral” problem of meat (Adams’ interest) incorporates both the living animal and the dying animal, whereas the “aesthetic” problem of meat involves the gruesomely slaughtered dead animal: the fleshy, bloody, and boney lifeless carcass. Whereas two aspects of the “absent referent” (the living animal and the dying animal) maintain the possibility of being “un-objectified” (i.e., viewed as a being with rights that need protecting) the third aspect can never be “un-objectified” because it is an object. Indeed, according to the food artist, the animal carcass is nothing more than a raw material.

There are compelling reasons, I believe, to be especially attentive to this latter aesthetic (as opposed to moral) problem of meat. The goal of vegan activists is seemingly to make the world a vegan world – one hundred percent of it. Gustatory disgust is arguably a more widespread emotion than moral disgust. Presumably even psychopaths experience it, though they do not experience moral disgust.149 Thus, eliciting that non-moral emotion might further the vegan cause more so than eliciting moral disgust. Anyone truly concerned with preventing the slaughter of animals would not care if you are psychopath or if you do not purchase animal products because simply they are “gross.” The interest of the animal rights activist would lay in the welfare of non-human animals. If a kind of aesthetic (vs. moral) disgust helped

149 While it is well-known the psychopaths lack moral emotions, such as guilt and remorse, there appears to be no evidence that they lack non-moral emotions, such as anger, happiness, and disgust. (James Blair et al., The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005)).
motivate distaste for the consumption of meat, attempts to elicit such an emotion should of course be encouraged.

La Varenne’s efforts to “disguise” and “beautify” meat were inspired, at least in part, by the “aesthetic” problems meat posed as an inanimate object, as his “raw material.” When we read the directions for Jacobin’s Potage, “Garnish it with small ends of Wings without bones at one end,” or for Potage of a joint of Mutton farced, “Sow it [the Mutton, the sheep] up very neatly so that the end of the knuckle be very clean,” it is natural to interpret them as La Varenne’s attempts to solve the aesthetic problem of meat. Exposed bones and dirty knuckles are neither visually attractive nor appetizing. Indeed, they are disgusting.

This successful “problem solving” suggests that Le Cuisinier François should perhaps be regarded as the modern meat industry’s foundational text. After all, it provides the valuable secrets of making meat appear to be something that it is not: aesthetically pleasing. La Varenne claims to have developed the techniques for this “problem solving” over the period of ten years. It is unsurprising that it would take at least this long to write a book devoted largely to the hands-on dismemberment and manipulation of non-human animal bodies. The peeling back of skin, the pulling out of organs, the draining of blood was written in a highly-systematic and sometimes even poetic manner, so as to disguise the disgusting nature of meat’s processing and preparation. A dark triumph in the history of literary genres. Le Cuisinier Français transformed the world’s conception of meat – and especially France’s conception of meat. Meat had become an object of beauty.

150 La Varenne, The French Cook, 25.
151 Ibid., 37.
IV. La Varenne’s Legacy: \textit{le Restaurant}

La Varenne’s invention of aesthetically pleasing meat led to novel cravings – and where there were new cravings, there were new opportunities to make profit. La Varenne surely recognized this: he was one of France’s first “chef entrepreneurs,” writing and then selling the world’s first “true”\textsuperscript{152} cookbook. That cookbook’s first major legacy is arguably one of the world’s greatest and most widely-adopted inventions: the restaurant. The origin story of this industry is strikingly similar to the origin story of French gastronomy: at its center, is delicate meat.

“Centuries before a restaurant was a place to eat (and even several decades after), a \textit{restaurant} was a thing to eat, a restorative broth… a tiny cup of bouillon.”\textsuperscript{153} The restaurant industry, a 1766 French invention,\textsuperscript{154} capitalized on \textit{Le Cuisinier François}’ most central recipe: meat bouillon. Recall the very first recipe that appears in La Varenne’s cookbook: “The manner of making the broth for the feeding of all Po.s, be it of Potage, first course or intercourse (middle service).”\textsuperscript{155} There is significance in the fact that out of all many culinary inventions found in the revolutionary cookbook, it was the \textit{most refined} form of meat that was chosen to serve as the building block of one world’s most influential industries.

Nearly a hundred years after the recipe for meat bouillon was first written down by La Varenne, its formula naturally changed a bit, acquiring some alterations for improvement. It still called for a variety of meats, “usually ham, veal, and some

\textsuperscript{152} In the contemporary sense of the word.
\textsuperscript{153} Spang, \textit{The Invention of the Restaurant}, 1.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{155} La Varenne, \textit{The French Cook}, 19.
fowl (chicken, partridge, or pheasant)”\textsuperscript{156} and required a significant amount of cooking time, usually many hours.\textsuperscript{157} However, it now excluded any vegetables, even a mere “bundle of herbs” or “a few cloves.”\textsuperscript{158} The updated recipe also involved no “additional liquid,” such as water, so as to produce the purest of meat essences – literally meat sweat. Nonetheless, the culinary tool used to create this meat juice, a tightly sealed kettle, was called a “\textit{bain marie}” (hot water bath).\textsuperscript{159}

This new recipe did not involve a rejection of La Varenne’s traditional culinary techniques and tastes. Rather, it embraced them ten-fold. La Varenne placed meat at the center of his cuisine, with vegetables comprising the perimeter; the \textit{restaurant} was comprised of only meat, excluding vegetables and even water entirely. La Varenne disguised his meat, using bouillon to drown larger pieces of flesh; the \textit{restaurant} rejected these fleshy pieces altogether in favor of pure meat sweat, not even minced or pulverized meat would do. La Varenne emphasized the importance of food presentation, garnishing nearly every dish in his cookbook; the \textit{restaurant} was served “in gold-rimmed, white faience dishes.”\textsuperscript{160}

The demand for this seemingly bizarre industry was due to an “epidemic” of sorts taking place in the \textit{haute cuisine} capital of Paris: high-class men and women were all suddenly claiming to be “weak of chest.” This expression was used to make a statement about one’s “nervous [literally of the nervous system] sympathy, and to have good taste in food was to be exquisitely sensitive to the stimuli of nature.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{156} Spang, \textit{The Invention of the Restaurant}, 1.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{158} La Varenne, \textit{The French Cook}, 19.
\textsuperscript{159} Spang, \textit{The Invention of the Restaurant}, 1.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 38.
The central idea was that “gustatory and aesthetic sensibility were equally grounded in the senses.”\textsuperscript{162} The restaurant was used as a nutritious replacement for the “overly stimulus” evening meal.\textsuperscript{163} Those with “good sensibility” (literally) would not deign to consume the “unpurified” and “undainty” form of meat, one whose “aesthetic” and “gustatory” qualities had not yet been refined. A century after the publication of \textit{Le Cuisinier François}, Parisians were refusing to eat meat that had not been sufficiently transformed by the food artist. La Varenne’s secret had “infected” French society – or at least those who knew anything about haute cuisine.

The preference for only aesthetically pleasing, and therefore significantly processed and prepared, meat products would continue to inspire the creation of new industries. These included the nineteenth-century French invention of the abattoir\textsuperscript{164} and the twentieth-century American invention of the factory farm.\textsuperscript{165} Virtually all of contemporary Western society is now “weak of chest” and seriously addicted to dainty and delicate meat.

V. \textbf{The Aspect of the Absent Referent that is Never Truly Absent}

The absent referent is crucial to the art of French meat-making: it aims to sever the relationship between the ugly raw material and the beautiful masterpiece that raw material becomes. It serves to dispense with the unaesthetic properties of

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{164} “L’abattoir, entre histoire et création contemporaine,” \textit{Journal de Confolens} no. 184 (2006), 3; The invention of the abattoir, the slaughterhouse, was inspired not only by an aesthetic issue but also a real concern about whether public scenes of animal cruelty might incite violence in and amongst humans (Jim Phillips, review of “Meat, Modernity and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse” by Paula Young, \textit{The Economic Review} 62, no. 2 (2009), 512). This discussion is important with regard to the history of meat in France but is beyond the scope of this thesis.
\textsuperscript{165} Kayla Kutzer, “Factory Farming: Overview,” \textit{Pace Law School Library}. 
meat: those properties simply not welcome within aesthetic-obsessed France. The modern meat industry has only continued to increase the role the absent referent plays in their meaty products. Today, an enormous amount of time, energy, and money is dedicated to upholding this centuries-long French tradition that is the absent referent. It comes in many forms, including carefully-considered marketing tactics, perfectly-designed packaging, and expensive construction projects designed to conceal the horrors that occur inside factory farms from the oblivious outside world.

Yet, despite the existence of these barriers which aim to make the fleshy carcass invisible to the consumer, the dainty end product will ultimately always have its origins in that unsightly fleshy carcass. No matter how hard the meat industry tries and no matter how far technology advances, “meat” can never be anything other than the very product of flesh, blood, and bones. Thus, the absent referent – specifically the aspect that is the dead animal (i.e., the carcass, the object) – can never be truly absent; indeed, the dead animal is exactly what is present on one’s plate.166

I am thus moved to pose the following questions to the French food artist: Why not simply abandon the exhaustive (and ultimately hopeless) process of constructing the absent referent in the first place? Why not merely forego the animal carcass that one tries so hard to conceal but in fact cannot? Is there not another less problematic raw material that might work just as well, or perhaps even better than meat? Lucky for me, a three-Michelin-star contemporary French chef has already found the answer to such questions: “Vegetables!” he replies.

166 The other two aspects of the absent referent that are the living and the dying animal are made fully absent (“invisible”) at the moment the death occurs. The dead animal, however, begins to and continues to exist as it is presented to the consumer. Thus, it is this last aspect that is not in fact made absent and might be considered, in some respects, not truly an aspect of the absent referent.
Chapter 4
Alain Passard and The Art of Making Vegetables

I. Embracing a New Culinary Medium

“A beet can be cooked in a crust of salt, like meat. A stalk of celery can be smoked. An onion can be flambéed. A carrot can be grilled. This school of fire that is more present with animal flesh, I use it at the service of the vegetables,” chef Alain Passard passionately proclaims. Passard exemplifies the best qualities of an authentic French cuisinier while rejecting the worst. He has solved the aesthetic problem of meat by simply abandoning meat altogether; without the source of the problem, there is no problem.

Passard, who once regularly used meat in his haute cuisine dishes, claims to have had a career-altering epiphany that led to his embracing of vegetables as the center of his cuisine. It occurred in 2000, in the midst of a successful career at his top-rated Paris restaurant, Arpège. “Originally, l’Arpège was a rotisserie. People mainly came to me for meat; poultry, prime rib of beef, and so on. I finally got the impression that I had read the whole book on the subject and wanted to start a different one.”

Passard, like many other food artists, had mastered the art of meat-making, an art whose “whole book” had already been written. He was now eager to discover a new realm, one that had not been entered before and thus one that contained endless possibilities for culinary innovation. After a year of searching, Passard finally discovered this new realm. Vegetables became his new artistic medium and the

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garden became his muse. The food that had once been considered a mere side dish was now the centerpiece of Passard’s culinary art. As one of his contemporaries explains: Passard “put vegetables at the center of the world of Arpège” and made “the guest star… the lead actor.”

Before further exploring Passard’s discovery of the artistic realm of vegetables, let us consider why he abandoned the artistic realm of meat in the first place. We have already hinted at one reason for this abandonment: meat-making had been practiced by so many for so long and thus all its “secrets” had finally been found. La Varenne had found the first of these secrets in 1651 and chefs of the twenty-first century had apparently found the last. Indeed, Passard himself would seem to agree, as he has remarked that it was a desire for innovation and creativity that inspired his switch to vegetables. Yet other remarks of Passard hint at an additional, and perhaps less obvious, reason for his switch from meat to vegetables.

This second reason for the meat to vegetable shift involves the clash between French aesthetic perfectionism and the problematic third aspect of the absent referent: the dead animal. “Meat is the most difficult thing to execute perfectly,” says Passard. Indeed, it is impossible to execute perfectly because, as stated in the previous chapter, the unaesthetic dead animal can never truly be absent from meat. Passard was exhausted by attempting to construct an absent referent that could never be perfectly absent. Flesh, whether it be smoked, flambéed, or grilled, was still flesh. “Dealing with the dead animal, blood and all, it exhausts me… just thinking about it makes me feel tired… It’s a grueling process.” Passard’s embracing of the French value of perfectionism clearly played a role in propelling him toward a plant-based art.
I. Learning from the Old & Perfecting the New: The Art of Vegetables

This thesis began with a discussion of the birth of French identity. It was an identity intimately entwined with a foundational (now “traditional”) cuisine – a cuisine defined by three essential features. *First*, French cuisine was hailed for its *innovation*: it boldly distinguished itself from the outdated Italian-style that had previously dominated Europe. *Second*, French cuisine was hailed for its *perfection*: it transformed something that was remarkably unremarkable into a luxurious, aesthetically pleasing item to be savored. *Third*, French cuisine elevated food to a new level, it presented *food as art* for the very first time.

We then learned in Chapter 2 that it was specifically *meat* that was made innovative, perfect, and artistic (by means of disguise). Thus, French cuisine – that which came to symbolize French identity – was defined as (and arguably still is defined as): innovative, perfect, artistic, and *meat-centric*. La Varenne’s colleagues knew how important meat was to their nation’s identity: “In France, in a three-star restaurant, to say that you’re going to stop eating meat is an insult to French culture… a crime against the state inconceivable to the French mind.”168 Nonetheless, Passard had made his decision to reject meat entirely. Could Passard reject meat and embrace vegetables while still maintaining the incredibly important French food values of innovation, perfection, and art?

When Passard switched to vegetables, he did so in a way that did not disrespect the tradition-soaked art of meat-making. Indeed, one cannot deny, whether one be a vegan or a carnivore, that meat has served as the primary experimental tool

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for culinary exploration in France. Meat is at the center of gastronomy’s origin and has remained there. Passard recognizes this fact and uses it to his advantage when approaching his new vegetable-centric art:

In the 1990s, Arpège cooked meat. It’s wonderful that we practiced this type of carnivorous cuisine. Those early years really taught me how to cook, how to choose produces, how to season things, how to combine them, how to pay attention to textures and flavors.

Thus, for Passard, when it comes to meat, the attitude is not merely “out with the old” but instead “let’s learn from the old to make the best possible new.” It would be unwise for a vegetable-based chef to ignore the culinary breakthroughs that happened to occur while meat was the “lead actor.” Though grilling has been long associated with pork, that does not mean that grilling should be abandoned altogether. Instead, a true vegetable artist would embrace grilling like it had never been embraced before – by grilling that which has never been grilled before: a stalk of celery, a radish, a bulb of fennel!

It is this “secular” (vs. moralizing) approach to vegetarian cooking that separates Passard from many contemporary plant-based chefs. This approach, though likely unpopular amongst the morally-motivated vegan community, might be more palatable to the non-vegan community. Passard is, however, unabashedly indifferent to the moral implications of eating animals. The first aspects of the absent referent – the living and dying animal – do not concern him. Like a true food artist, one motivated exclusively by innovation and aesthetics, it is boredom and frustration with the cumbersome animal carcass that deters Passard from continuing to use animals as
an artistic medium. In 2001, when Passard announced that Arpège would be trading in meat for vegetables, he provided his country with the following explanation:

It's got nothing to do with morality. It's just that I woke up one morning and didn't take any pleasure any more in eating meat. I wanted to change the material with which I worked. It's like an artist who works in watercolours and turns his hand to oils or a sculptor in wood who changes to bronze.\textsuperscript{169}

By approaching vegetarianism with this sense of moral indifference and by alluding to the French value of artistic creation, Passard’s new vegetable-based enterprise would eventually become enormously successful, despite its context of meat-loving France. Alain Passard’s new cuisine, a kind of “nouvelle” “nouvelle cuisine,” maintained the “Frenchness” of French cuisine by embracing art, perfection, and innovation.

“When I cook, I need to gather information with all my senses: visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory.”\textsuperscript{170} It is his emphasis on a multi-sensory approach to food that arguably distinguishes Passard from other contemporary chefs. The average chef would, of course, be aware of the visual, olfactory, and perhaps also tactile characteristics of their dishes, but Passard takes it to the extreme by raising his awareness to include the realm of sound. He is so intimately in-touch with his food, his artistic medium, that he even notes the differences in sound between the slicing of a lemon and the dicing of an onion. He believes that eating is an aesthetic experience.


\textsuperscript{170} Christophe Blain, \textit{In the Kitchen with Alain Passard} (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013), 68.
grounded in all five senses and that even the subtest crunch of carrot or daintiest slurp of soup can add something of value for his consumer audience.

It is this profound appreciation for the raw materials themselves that clearly distinguishes Passard from La Varenne. Whereas Passard contemplates the “intrinsic beauty of the [raw] beet,” La Varenne would never have contemplated the intrinsic beauty of the freshly-killed lamb. Whereas Passard “holds the chives delicately, like a florist handling fragile blossoms,” La Varenne could not possibly have handled his cumbersome raw materials in such a way. The meat-artist is required to create art from unsightly, even repulsive, raw materials. The vegetable artist, on the other hand, creates artwork from raw materials that are already beautiful and vibrant. Therefore, the vegetable artists’ masterpiece is arguably more thoroughly beautiful than that of the meat artist: the vegetable artist has nothing to hide. Here, we might compare “vegetable art” to “paint art:” it is not just the finished product – the painting – that is beautiful, the vibrant palette of colors used in the creation of that painting is also beautiful.

This intrinsic beauty that is found in virtually every aspect of Passard’s vegetable-based cuisine leaves him reveling with so much joy, excitement, and appreciation that he has become a true workaholic. Passard is so in love with his art that he refuses to take any vacations and is satisfied with only four hours of sleep per night.

171 Ibid., 29.
172 Ibid., 25.
173 Ibid., 93.
Despite their difference in preferred artistic medium, La Varenne and Passard doubtlessly share revolutionary understandings of food. I would credit both chefs with inciting their own food revolutions: La Varenne invented the notion of food as art and Passard made this notion explicit for the first time. While La Varenne was conscious of his “neat and dainty” meat invention, he may have been unaware that he had effectively created an entirely new field of art: food art. More than three centuries later, when Passard began experimenting with food, the “culinary arts” were a well-established phenomenon. Yet, even in food-obsessed France, cuisine was not yet viewed as equivalent to other conventional forms of fine art, such as painting or sculptor. “Art,” in the conventional sense, is largely associated with either visual or auditory senses. Passard was the first to connect food art with other forms of art by “translating” his culinary art into a more conventional art form, one that was visual and two-dimensional.

Yet, Passard still maintained and emphasized the uniqueness of culinary art by representing it with “unconventional” conventional art: collages, haute collages.\(^\text{174}\) In his 2010 “Collages et Recettes,” “the chef offers us 48 vegetable plates where [he] himself has cut and illustrated his recipes… a great first for a cookbook.”\(^\text{175}\) This was something that had never been done before. For each recipe page, there is an accompanying page with a beautiful, colorful piece of artwork. As Passard states in his revolutionary cookbook’s preface: “C’est la recette qui inspire le collage: parce qu’elle présentait une belle harmonie dans l’assiette, j’ai voulu la fixer dans le papier” (It’s the recipe that inspires the collage: because [the recipe] was presenting a

\(^{174}\) See images 6 through 8 in Appendix.

\(^{175}\) Alain Passard, _Collages et Recettes_ (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2010), cover page.
beautiful harmony on the plate, I wanted to fix it on the paper”). Vegetable Chef Alain Passard perfected the French tradition that had been initiated by Meat Chef La Varenne: he showed the world that *the chef is a veritable artist.*

It would require a revolutionary thinker to recognize an idea as radical as vegetable-based art and it would take a perfectionist to implement this idea in the manner of Passard. Even the well-respected *haute cuisine* structure of the French Michelin Guide does not live up to Passard’s high standards. When he initiated his culinary revolution, years after he had obtained his three stars, he began to work as though there was an imaginary fourth star. This would explain Passard’s perfectionism and formality that is vivid in nearly every documentary, book, and article about the chef.

In his kitchen at Arpège, everyone is addressed using courtesy titles, even dish cleaners are referred to as “madame” or “monsieur.” This atmosphere of respect and dignity implies that everyone is held to the highest standards. Each aspect of the edible art-making process is scrutinized and contemplated: *nothing* goes unnoticed. Passard intimately engages in nearly every aspect of his enterprise: the garden, the kitchen, and even the dining table. Regarding the latter aspect, Passard will inspect each table before his restaurant opens so as to ensure that there is not a single spot or crumb on his immaculate tablecloths. His obsession with details is reflected in how he describes one of his dishes: “Every layer has to look beautiful, right to the bottom. Beautifully transparent. No aggressiveness.”

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177 Blain, *In the Kitchen with Alain Passard,* 20.
179 Blain, *In the Kitchen with Alain Passard,* 19.
Another way in which Passard’s perfectionism is apparent involves his meticulous treatment toward the tiniest and daintiest of his ingredients. “Use this to scoop up every drop of the sauce,” he directs one eater. Because Passard recognizes the inherent beauty and value in his culinary art, it would be disrespectful to forget even the smallest of details. Just like one who appreciates the subtlest brushstroke in a tableau, Passard appreciates even the smallest drop of sauce. Every ingredient is handled with great precision, even a single chop of chive: “Alain scoops up the chives with a spoon so precisely that not a single fleck is left on the marble, and puts them in a bowl.”

This treatment of food, especially in this modern era of egregious food waste, is significant. Just as Passard might help inspire a kinder world through his vegetarian cooking, he might also inspire a more sustainable world through his opposition to food waste. Even as he strolls through his garden, he matter-of-factly remarks that there is simply no reason not to use a perfectly good fruit that has fallen to the ground. He calls attention to the importance of valuing each ounce of food: “Now pay attention. This is important. Spoon up any leftover jus.”

Again, it is perhaps Passard’s “secular” and perfectionist approach to cooking, one that is motivated strictly by the artistry of food as opposed to “politics,” that has the potential to transform the way the world eats. Judging and preaching would never occur inside Arpège. Indeed, his avoidance of political issues is so great that he even chooses to refer to his cuisine as “la cuisine végétale” (“vegetable cuisine”), veering

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180 Ibid., 13.
181 Ibid., 25.
183 Blain, In the Kitchen with Alain Passard, 69.
away from other adjectives like “végétarienne” (“vegetarian”). In fact, after some years of exclusively vegetarian cooking, Passard decided to incorporate small, complementary meat products in his dishes. Again, we see evidence that his attitude toward food is one that is strictly aesthetic rather than to moral. His advocating for food that is plant-based (almost entirely vegetarian) and sustainably-minded (anti-food-waste as well as locally-sourced) is essentially “happenstantial.” It was his unique appreciation for food in general and his search for a new creative outlet that led him to stumble upon a politically-charged gastronomy: one that is plant-based and eco-friendly.

La cuisine végétale, according to Passard, offers a chef “a tremendous amount of surprises, because there is still everything to be done with a tomato, a carrot, an eggplant. There is a lot of enchantment in vegetable cookery.”  

Passard immerses himself in the creativity-inducing pleasures of the edible experiment. His kitchen keeps no recipes. Every day the menu is determined by what happens to come in from the garden that morning. Passard loves to expand his imagination with those he calls his “posh guinea pigs” – the regulars of Arpège. He presents them with everything from vegetable-infused oil to cauliflower breadcrumbs. “I love inventing. Gathering the ingredients. Playing with colors.”

It is ultimately colors that inspire Passard to remain securely within his awe-inspiring realm of vegetable cuisine. “Color is an axis of creativity.”  

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185 Blain, *In the Kitchen with Alain Passard*, 18.
187 Blain, *In the Kitchen with Alain Passard*, 5.
188 Ibid., 29.
contemporary chef has thus highlighted a distinctive factor involved in the aesthetic 
problem of meat: it is simply not colorful. Forgot the repulsiveness of flesh, blood, 
and bones, it is the mere blandness of the meat color wheel that is so problematic for 
the food artist. The raw material of meat limits the chef’s choice to brownish-pink or 
pinkish-brown. The rainbow palette of vegetables, on the other hand, is rife with 
possibilities! This phenomenon has been exploited by Alain Passard, who assigns a 
beautifully-rich color to each one of his forty-eight recipes in *Collages et Recettes*. It 
is indeed the wide variety of colors that makes each one of Passard’s collages pop. 
These stunning abstract representations of vegetable cuisine show the reader that 
vegetables should never be mere side dish; they are too beautiful to not be placed at 
centerstage.

Passard uses colors to inspire his innovative dishes, while maintaining a 
respect for the “classics,” for traditional dishes. It is this mélange that preserves the 
“Frenchness” of French food. The vegetable chef incorporates France’s pride by 
being the first revolutionary cook of the modern era with France’s value of 
innovation, that which inspires a revolution.

Caviar, embraced by the French during the Belle Époque\(^\text{189}\) and whose very 
etymology is French, is reenvisioned by Passard. In his cookbook, he offers a recipe 
for “*Trilogie de tomates et caviar d’aubergine à la flamme*” (“Trilogy of tomatoes 
and eggplant caviar à la flamme\(^\text{190}\))\(^\text{191}\). \(^\text{191}\) Passard transforms this French favorite into a

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\(^\text{190}\) I choose to leave these latter words untranslated, as they simply carry too much meaning and so are 
difficult to capture in another language. “Flamme” might be translated as either “flame” but could also 
be understood to mean “passion” or “love.”

\(^\text{191}\) Passard, *Collages et Recettes*, 86.
new and exciting form by carefully cooking and harvesting the pulp of an eggplant.

The recipe, written in forest green font, appears alongside a striking collage featuring almond-shaped cut-outs of red, purple, white, yellow, brown, light gray, and dark gray – all pasted on a bold black background. The mouth waters and the mind contemplates.

The best and most famous example of a “Passardian” innovation that is equal parts tradition and equal parts inventive is his take on the ultimate classic: an apple pie. This American symbol is refashioned à la française. As he puts, the “Tarte Bouquet de Roses” had “taken the flavor of the traditional apple tart to a whole new level.” His colleagues describe the preparation of the dish as beginning by “turning the apple into fabric” This pie is so clearly ingrained in the field of art because its main ingredient is turned into an easily recognizable artistic medium: fabric. The fabric is transformed into an incredibly complex apple pie, involving “rolls of finely sliced apple” and “berlingots crushed into ‘sugar.’” “The apple skin is the color of dried roses. The fruit is the firm in the middle, yet the bottoms are lightly stewed. A shallow disk of puff pastry holds the bouquet together.” Passard was so proud of his dish and its ingenuity that he patented it. Curiously, just like La Varenne whose second cookbook was entitled Le Pâtissier français (1653), Passard began as a cook and evolved into a pastry chef. Yet their art would take dramatically and importantly

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192 See Image 5 of Appendix.
195 This transformation does not indicate that the apple is not itself beautiful, only that is a raw material used in the production of a beautiful piece of art. Perhaps an analogy to gold can make the point vivid. Although gold is beautiful in its natural state, before it is transformed into a beautiful piece of jewelry, it is the jewelry that is a work of art. In contrast to La Varnne’s raw materials, Passard’s raw materials are beautiful.
196 Blain, In the Kitchen with Alain Passard, 54.
different forms. Whereas La Varenne sought to hide or disguise the drab if visceral ugliness of his raw material (meat), Passard seeks to display and even enhance the natural beauty of his vibrant raw material (vegetables). Yet both strategies (disguise and display) despite their differences, are truly transformative, for the final product, what actually ends up on the gourmand’s plate, looks nothing like the raw material that constitutes its origin. For this reason, both La Varenne and Passard can be considered true food artists.

VI. The French Terroir: A Permanent Claim to “Leader in Luxury”

Alain Passard is arguably a legacy of François Pierre de la Varenne; he was born into the magical culinary context of France that was created three-and-a-half centuries ago. Passard is conscious of the privilege and responsibility involved in being a French chef. He acknowledges “French cuisine’s position [throughout] the entire world.”¹⁹⁷ His risqué move from meat-based to vegetable-based art had to be done just right in order to succeed in a country that has had, and still very much has, such strong feelings about their food.

Today, France is no longer the superpower it once was. It was over three hundred and fifty years ago, when Le Cuisinier Français was published, that France had earned its title as “Leader in Luxury.” The cook was an enormous success, and everyone wanted to be French, or at least get a taste of Frenchness by cooking up an haute cuisine dish listed in La Varenne’s cookbook. Now, the French might occasionally find themselves asking whether their reputation is still as spectacular as it once was, especially as it was during the height of Louis XIV. In the age of

globalization, food science, and changing international power dynamics, how might France reclaim their title to having the world’s greatest cuisine?

The notion of terroir, a concept invented by the French in the sixteenth century, might help distinguish France from the rest of the world with regard to cuisine and its ingredients. The notion is simple: the food you grow takes on unique characteristics because of its location-specific climatic conditions. This would mean that a grape grown in the north of France would taste differently than a grape grown in the south of France and thus, a grape grown in France would taste differently than a grape grown anywhere else in the world. Identifying with the concept of terroir might rebuild France’s injured national pride, one that arguably never fully recovered from the occupation during World War II and from their massive colonial loses during the twentieth century. Embracing terroir, a nationalistic idea, might assuage their bruised ego. The French have claimed – with a nationalistic tone – that their “terre,” their ground, is the best possible ground for growing the best possible vegetables. If France’s vegetable-based cuisine were to be grounded in the belief that not only are vegetables delicious, but that France’s vegetables are the most delicious and of the greatest variety, competitors would not stand a chance. Even if Italy or England carefully followed every step of Alain Passard’s recipes, they could not eat truly French without fresh ingredients from the French terroir.

Alain Passard, a proud Frenchman, would “like to make gardening the profession of the future.” Though he spends more time in the kitchen, Passard can often be found in one of his many personally-owned gardens: those which feed

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198 Blain, In the Kitchen with Alain Passard, 92.
Arpège. Passard would appear to endorse the idea that vegetable artistry begins in the growing of the raw materials; he calls his gardeners “brilliant” and “artists.” These are well-deserved titles given that Passard expects his gardeners to grow each kind of vegetable in each of his three gardens. Passard does this in order to determine which climatic condition best highlights the flavors of the vegetable in question. By emphasizing the importance of the literal land involved in food art production, Passard might reintroduce the belief that France is the nation best suited for culinary creation. As French studies expert, Thomas Parker, puts it, “France has historically been Europe’s most developed agricultural… country, providing ample opportunity for terroir to expand in importance literally and metaphorically in the course of being evoked in everyday life.” If France were to embrace vegetable-based cuisine with an emphasis on innovation, perfection, and art and in the context of a conviction about terroir’s importance, vegetarianism would not simply survive but would surely thrive.

Some might worry that if France were to replace their meat-centric gastronomy with one that was vegetable-centric, a centuries-long cultural tradition would be lost. I would respond to this concern by pointing out that, in many ways, a vegetable cuisine more accurately captures “French culture” than does meat. Throughout the Medieval era and the Renaissance, the French ate vegetables much more than they ate meat. Indeed, only a fraction of the population indulged in meat regularly. For much of French history, meat has arguably served as a dividing

199 Ibid., 61.
200 Ibid., 91, 92.
symbol: one that divided the rich from the poor, the nobility from the peasants, the powerful from the powerless, and even men from women. In contrast, vegetables have a long history of being an accessible food. If practicing French tradition is done in the spirit of preserving a kind of cohesive French culture, should the French not embrace a food that has traditionally been accessible to all?

Vegetables are also tied to one of the most nationalistic of concepts: terroir. If the French wish to preserve their sense of food superiority, is there not a better way to do this than to invoke the inherent earthly powers that lie beneath their feet: the very soil of the French nation? Surely not. Embracing vegetables in the context of French gastronomy would not threaten France’s culture or international reputation; on the contrary, it would allow France to reclaim it.

For those concerned about fading the legacy of La Varenne, the man who invented French food, fear not. La Varenne’s culinary medium of meat may one day be abandoned, but his essence of cooking, his French essence of cooking, will never die. The artistry, perfection, and innovation found in French cuisine are here to stay. In fact, even vegetable enthusiast Alain Passard cannot escape La Varenne’s legacy. Passard’s restaurant Arpège is located, ironically though fittingly, on Rue de Varenne.
Epilogue

I am **passionate** about food. I have always enjoyed eating it and I have long enjoyed cooking it. From the moment I was born, food has played a significant role in my life: I grew up with a father who was an insatiable omnivore and a mother who was a vegetarian. They made quite the interesting couple and an absolutely fantastic pair of parents. This year, as a senior in college pondering my career prospects, I have come to see just how much I am the natural product of my parents. Although I’ve realized this for a long time, it has been confirmed by my enthusiastic decisions to write a thesis on veganism and to pursue a career in food sustainability. My father’s love for food combined with my mother’s profound empathy for animals has led to my placing the “vegan cause” at the center of my life.

“Everyone loves food,” sure, but not everyone **really** loves food. I think the world would be a better place if we all just thought a little more deeply about what (or who) it is we find on our plates. Food has become something many indulge in but don’t necessarily appreciate; humans have largely lost their intimate relationship with the food they eat. This has consequences – decidedly negative consequences.

I know this because I grew up with father who taught me how to grow food – lots of food! My favorite food to grow was tomatoes because I **love** tomatoes. I was just like my dad, who also loved tomatoes, and like my dad’s dad, who also loved tomatoes and “who would eat them whole from his garden just like an apple!” When I was eight or nine, my Dad decided that we would grow a garden in the “back forty.” Because of his arthritis, he was unable bend over, so I was in charge of laying all the bricks for the walkways and for much of the transplanting. This made me feel strong
and independent. Dad would direct me from up upon his stool and when he was not doing that, he’d be found in the “greenhouse:” the spot in our backyard where he placed three to four rolling carts stacked with dozens of Home Depot plastic planters that he had accumulated over the years. My dad could make virtually any contraption one could imagine out of the assortment of odds and ends hiding out in his workshop.

I watched hundreds of tiny green leaves pop to the surface, each one taking different twists and turns, swirling so as to catch as the sunlight. Inch by inch, root by root, they outgrew their little plastic homes and were ready to enter the ground. Within a couple months, the roughly twenty-by-ten-foot plot of land next to my dad’s back office sprung into a dense and edible forest: eggplants, onions, basil, zucchini, squash, oregano, beans, beefsteak tomatoes, plum tomatoes, heirloom tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, heirloom cherry tomatoes. It looked, and smelled, and tasted delicious. And I loved them all. Mom, Dad, and I ate garden ragout every other week for a couple of years. My dad cooked so much that we soon had more than a years’ worth of various frozen vegetable dishes in our freezer.

I loved our garden but my favorite place in the world was (and still is) our kitchen. I love the kitchen because I love cooking. My mom’s rules for ten-year old Ingrid were: “only butter knives and the microwave!” I was determined to make culinary magic happen even with my limited tools. Whole wheat toast squares topped with Trader Joe’s salsa and fresh herbs was one specialty. Another regular recipe, one that I learned from my Dad, was gourmet tuna fish: a couple cans of tuna, chopped celery (thick but not too think, as my Dad liked it), diced carrot and onion, a little parsley, a dollop of mayonnaise, and some red wine vinegar. Serve with Club
crackers. Cooking became a hobby. Perhaps it was in reaction to years of uninspiring packed lunches consisting of nothing but a plain hummus sandwich and a bag of carrot sticks (my mom was not the chef of the family). Or perhaps, I simply loved food.

In fourth grade, the same year I started my kitchen experimenting, my tablemates and I invented the “snack time potluck.” Every day at snack time, you’d eat your snack at your table with your tablemates. One day, one of us (it may have been me) proposed that we start sharing our various snacks with one another: to potluck. My tuna fish became famous! I felt flattered that so many of my peers were raving about “Ingrid’s tuna fish.” I loved making dishes and loved sharing what I made in the kitchen with other people even more.

Then… dun, dun, dun… the tuna fish became a problem. It all began during a grocery shopping trip with my dad, who was in search of ingredients for that night’s dinner. “Tonight, we’ll be eating fish,” he said. Yum! That was a meal I very much enjoyed. We approached the deli together, something we had done many times before, but this time something different happened. Apparently, I had never witnessed, or taken notice of, my dad buying a fish before. He picked one out from beneath the glass counter that was pale gray with a head, a tail, eyeballs, and scales. We were eating that for dinner? Ew! I had eaten fish plenty of times before but had never seen it so “unrendered,” with the notable exception of our rainbow-colored, never-to-be-eaten fish tank pets. That night, I refused to eat the scaly, spiny fish for dinner, despite my father’s frustrated pleas.
That day ultimately led to my decision to become vegetarian. Once I had discovered the secret of meat’s truly unsightly nature, I couldn’t help but see it everywhere. Seeing then turned to searching. I remember nauseously observing the little white fat bubbles in my sloppy joes shortly after the “fish event.” Next, I found a tiny bone in my tuna fish. One of my favorite foods had been ruined forever. It didn’t take long before I made the decision to transition to vegetarianism, a lifestyle with which I was familiar because of my mom, who had been vegetarian since she was fifteen. As my dad grew increasingly annoyed by my refusals to eat even my favorite meat-centric dishes, I would confide in my mom, who had a similar experience with regard to discovering meat’s unsightly nature. She said to me, “When I was about ten, I walked into the kitchen, where my aunt was cooking a chicken dinner and came upon a pair of severed chicken feet on the kitchen counter.” This disgust-provoking experience would eventually lead to my mom to become vegetarian. Perhaps these kinds of disgust-inducing “epiphanies” run in the family.

When I told my classmates that I had become vegetarian, their first concern was the disappearance of what had become a favorite treat. “No! But what about the tuna fish?” My love for sharing food and my newfound vegetarianism conflicted. As a solution, I decided to continue making my “Tuna Fish Speacial” for my classmates but would simply choose not to eat it myself. It seemed a reasonable compromise. This was possible because, frankly, I was unphased by the moral implications of making a dead-animal snack for my friends. In fact, even many months into my vegetarianism, I had not given much thought at all to the moral implications of my dietary decision. I stopped eating meat because of some kind of instinctive feeling to
stay away from the icky-looking objects. Some might say I was just a picky eater, but I prefer the term “thoughtful eater.” I was still loved food immensely and was happy to try just about any dish that didn’t involve meat.

Today, I wonder if my decision to become a vegetarian might have been, at least in part, influenced by my meaningful and direct relationship with food, with vegetables in particular. As a young child, I watched my tasty tomatoes from the moment they sprung up from the soil to the moment they entered my mouth. The more I began to think about the details of meat’s origin, the more I realized how gruesomely different it was from that of my garden vegetables. Plus, half the fun of making my treats in the kitchen involved their vegetable-based presentation. It was always the colors of vegetables – vegetables that could be sliced, diced, minced, or peeled – that made my edible presentations so beautiful. The bland color of tuna fish, in contrast, simply served as a neutral background for displaying the bright orange of the carrot discs, the soft green of the celery crescents, and the deep purple of the onion slivers. Perhaps, I just liked the look of vegetables more than meat. The fact that real suffering was involved in meat preparation remained an almost kind of “abstract” idea to me for many years.

Fast-forward to over a decade later and I find myself engaging in vegan activism that is entirely heartfelt and motivated by morality. Today, my aversion toward meat is because of my ethical and environmental concerns about the exploitative industry. Allowing animals to suffer for their entire lives, killing them, and then eating them is one of contemporary society’s greatest sins. It is a sin we prefer to overlook and that is made easy to overlook, especially on account the
seventeenth-century invention of aesthetically pleasing meat. I may have discovered this passion of mine with moral indifference, but what began as a strictly aesthetic concern led me to perceive meat in a way that was different from how society presented it. My discovery of meat’s unsightly nature led me to ask questions about my food in general: Where did it come from? What did it look like before it was cooked up or prepared? What did it smell like before it was soaked in sauce and seasoning? Did it have eyes, a head, a tail?

Once I began to reflect on these questions, it was natural to begin posing others: Who was my food? Did she have a family? Did she suffer before she died? After a couple years, I realized that vegetarianism was simply not enough; other food, like dairy, was just as repulsive as meat – and not just because its origin was unsightly but because it was upsetting.

Humans have largely lost their direct relationship with the food they eat and that has consequences, decidedly negative consequences. These consequences go far beyond non-human animal suffering. Humans trapped within the systems of the modern meat and dairy industries suffer too. Today, slaughterhouse workers are predominately made up of immigrants and people of color, who are often afraid to report frequently-occurring injuries because they fear losing their job. In North Carolina, many factory farms are located near low-income neighborhoods. The pollution they produce finds its way into the surrounding air and water, sometimes

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causing fatal diseases and respiratory illnesses in nearby residents. Livestock also plays an enormous role in climate change. It is responsible for at least fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions. These facts represent only a fraction of the consequences of today’s meat and dairy industries. The further we distance ourselves from the food we eat, the more likely it is that this exploitation will continue or even increase. With the aesthetic problem of meat disguised, it becomes easier to hide the ethical problems as well.

Let’s finally unmask this industry that has been hiding its secrets for centuries.

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204 David Harris, “The Industrialization of Agriculture and Environmental Racism: A Deadly Combination Affecting Neighborhoods and the Dinner Table,” seminar presented at the 72nd Annual Convention of the National Bar Association, July 30, 1997.

Appendix

Image 1: a culinary creation by Alain Passard

Image 2: “Ivory White carrot ribbons with mustard sprouts and Laurier scent” by Alain Passard
Image 3: “Ratatouille Bigouden” by Alain Passard

Image 4: a dining table display by Alain Passard
Image 5: “Bouquet de Roses” by Alain Passard
Image 6: collages by Alain Passard

Image 7: collage by Alain Passard
Image 8: Alain Passard displaying the ingredients which inspired the collage underneath.
Image 9: a page from “In the Kitchen with Alain Passard” by Christophe Blain
Image Citations

https://www.facebook.com/a.passard/photos/a.219363834871539/376511399156781/?type=1&theater

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Image 8: “Entre voisins : Alain Passard, le grand chef qui parlait comme un vigneron!,” *Ampelos*.


https://cnz.to/books-cookbooks/en-cuisine-avec-alain-passard/