

The Restaurants of Paris: A Translation from *Paris à table*

Abstract: A brief introduction summarizing the author’s professional career and his literary style and procedure precedes this annotated translation of the chapter “The Restaurants of Paris” from Eugène Briffault’s 1846 text, *Paris à table*. Along with an historical discussion and a look back at the glorious days of the Empire’s establishments, the chapter examines the specialties, the décor, and the patrons of the grand restaurants of the author’s time and before. Looking at the changing restaurant scene since the fall of Napoleon, Briffault criticizes, in particular, the contemporary preference for the opulence of the surroundings over the quality of the food. Along with several anecdotes about specific meals and peculiar characters, he also observes restaurant owners and their staffs, with particular regard

to the skills and temperament of the Parisian waiter. Briffault considers such celebrated restaurants as the Cadran bleu, Rocher de Cancale, and Chez Véry—restaurants famous for their cuisine, the lively crowds, and the novelists (along with many of their characters) who dined there. But he does not ignore the role of the mid-range restaurants and bourgeois tables, and he descends as well into the lower depths, visiting the eateries catering to workers and the students on the Left Bank, the gargotes, the *tapis francs*, the prix fixes, the Flicoteaus and Rougets.

Keywords: Briffault, Paris, restaurants, Balzac, gastronomy.

Introduction

PUBLISHED IN 1846, *PARIS À TABLE* is occasionally mentioned along with Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du goût* and Dumas’s *Le grand dictionnaire de cuisine* as one of the seminal works for the study of nineteenth-century gastronomy.¹ In fact, in a *Le Monde* review (July 25, 2003, p. 11) of the 2003 edition of the book, P.-J. Catinchi referred to it as “the richest view of Balzac’s time, seen from the table.” Referenced by observers of the Parisian dining scene almost from the day of its publication, it is still frequently cited by culinary historians and critics today.

Its author, Eugène-Vincent Briffault, was born in Périgueux in 1799 and died in the Charenton insane asylum in 1854. In his prime, in the 1840s, he was a well-known journalist, critic, and man-about-town, and his output as a writer was both prolific and varied. Along with *Paris à table*, he published a book on water sports (*Paris dans l’eau*, 1844), a polemic against the Catholic Church (*Le secret de Rome au XIXe siècle*, 1846), a biography of the Duc d’Orléans (*Le Duc d’Orléans, prince royal*, 1842), and a pamphlet on dominoes (*Jeu de dominos*, 1843). He was a drama critic for *Le Temps*, editor/publisher for two short-lived periodicals (*Historiettes contemporaines*, 1842, and *La toilette des femmes de 1843*), and he wrote for *Le Figaro*, *Le Siècle*, *L’Artiste*, *Le Corsaire*, and *Le Charivari*. He also contributed to several collections

chronicling contemporary Parisian life—such as *La grande ville* (1842–43), *Les rues de Paris* (1844), and *Diabole à Paris* (1845)—where he was often in the company of such writers as Balzac, Dumas père, Théophile Gautier, George Sand, and Gérard de Nerval—and artists such as Gavarni, Daumier, and Bertall.

His contribution to one of those collections, *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840–42), was entitled “Le viveur,” or “the bon-vivant”; at about the same time a commentator referred to Briffault himself as “le sublime viveur, la gaieté incarnée” (Rousseau 1843, 79), and another gave him the title of “le plus joyeux aventurier de la Bohème littéraire.” This latter writer also warned authors about inviting Briffault to dinner in the hope of buying positive publicity, since his “indiscretion gastronomique” could be “effrayante” [“frightening”] (Mary-Lafon 1850, 172).

Clearly Briffault was well equipped to write a book on Parisian gastronomy. Lavishly illustrated by Bertall, *Paris à table* went through two printings in 1846, and although the book was occasionally used as a guide by tourists, the author had a grander purpose in mind. Harkening back to Brillat-Savarin (from whom he occasionally borrowed both ideas and phrasing), Briffault was determined to construct a social and cultural portrait of culinary Paris. “What a people eats . . . is known,” he wrote in his introductory chapter, “but nothing is known of those intimate customs that show their

true features under a picturesque and lively appearance, constantly in motion. That is what we are trying to do for Paris.”

Yet despite this single-minded purpose, the book’s structure and the content of its chapters are often fragmentary, at times an amalgam of anecdotes, citations, historical narratives, factual documentation, aphorism, and, on occasion, passages of lyrical brilliance. As with other journalists of his day, Briffault’s style can be breezy, fashionable, and allusive, and he sometimes can be found with tongue firmly implanted in cheek. (He closes the book with the following observation: “The fork with two prongs is in use in northern Europe. In England, they’re armed with a steel trident, a fork with three prongs. In France we have a fork with four prongs; it’s the height of civilization.”)

His chapter on “The Restaurants of Paris,” here translated into English for the first time, is the longest in the book, and it displays all of the above characteristics of his style and procedure. Along with an historical discussion and a lament for the glorious days of the Empire, Briffault considers in depth the specialties, the décor, and the patrons of the grand restaurants of his day, establishments often visited by France’s most popular authors—Balzac, Stendhal, Hugo, Paul de Kock—and many of their fictional characters. He also observes the owners and their staffs, and although he has little to say about chefs and their kitchen techniques, his commentary on the Parisian waiter is extensive and often still accurate today. (“General rule: to be happy with the waiter, make sure the waiter is happy with you.”) Nor does he ignore the middle-range restaurants, the bourgeois table, and he also descends into the lower depths, visiting the eateries catering to workers and students, the *gargotes*, the *tapis francs*, the *prix-fixes*. All in all, the chapter presents perhaps the most comprehensive look available of the Parisian restaurants of the time, in a city that was then not only the restaurant capital of the world but, according to Walter Benjamin, “the capital of the nineteenth century.”

The Restaurants of Paris

BY EUGÈNE BRIFFAULT

A century ago Paris did not have restaurateurs; only cook-caterers and grill masters were known: some ran tables d’hôte where the hosts never sat down, and the others delivered around town or served on their premises the dishes, dinners, or meals that were ordered². . . . The first restaurateur in Paris was a man named Lamy.³ He opened his dining rooms in one of the dark and narrow passageways that then surrounded the Palais-Royal. Joining forces against him were the cook-

caterers,⁴ but they could not drive him off. Originally, the restaurateur did not have the right to put linen on his tables; they were covered with a green or mottled oilcloth.

Beauvilliers⁵ was the one who first attracted a large part of the world. He never left a mark as a chef, but he had a quality that in our time is no more than a dead tradition: he paid full attention to the persons who came to dine at his place and roamed his halls incessantly to make sure his diners were happy. At the slightest doubt, he’d have one dish replaced by another, descend into his kitchens, and roar loudly at the negligent worker. With the return of the Bourbons,⁶ Beauvilliers became an object of ridicule, since he made the rounds of his tables in a Revolutionary jacket and knee britches, a sword by his side.

Our ancestors ate at the *cabaret*, our fathers went to the *cook-caterer*, we dine with the *restaurateur*.

Brillat-Savarin⁷ tried to define the restaurateur. According to him, “a restaurateur is one whose business consists in offering the public a banquet always at-hand and whose dishes are itemized in portions at a fixed price, at the behest of the consumer.” An obscure and ponderous definition!

He goes on: “The establishment is known as the *restaurant*—in the south of France they say a *restaurat*. The one who runs the establishment is the *restaurateur*. The nominal roll of the dishes, with price information, is called the *menu*, and the *menu to pay* for the note with the quantity of dishes provided and their price.” Today that’s known as the *bill*.

Finally, according to the master: “Among those who crowd into restaurants, few of them imagine that it’s impossible for the one who invented the restaurant not to have been a man of genius and profound observation.”

The establishment of the restaurateurs was a social act. Under the regime that they replaced, fine dining was the privilege of opulence; the restaurateurs put it within the reach of everyone. The man who can, perhaps once in his life, spend twenty or twenty-five francs on his dinner—if he knows how to choose his dishes and if he sits at the table of a first-class restaurant—is treated better than if he dined at the home of a prince:⁸ he’s served with as much splendor as inside a palace; he orders at his pleasure; his taste and his will know no bounds; released from all concerns, he obeys only the whims of his fancy and the delicacy of his palate. The restaurateurs have thus taken a large step toward social equality, which is far better founded on the community of pleasure than on theories that will never succeed in placing the poor on the same level as the rich.

Europe asked us for our restaurateurs, as missionaries of civilization. Under the Empire, the reputation of Parisian restaurants was raised so high, that in Europe they did for our

cuisine what the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had done for our literature; they made it universal. This splendor of the Empire's restaurants, with all due respect to the luxury of our current public tables, has not been equaled. We are not talking here about the vain brilliance owed to the decoration; we are talking about the actual merits of the service.

The restaurateurs, in their peregrinations, have followed the stages of Parisian emigration. The Boulevard du Temple, which was formerly the place where high society granted all of its favors, had famous restaurants: the Cadran bleu, the Galote, and other houses experienced triumphs that Delfieux or the Méridien and the Capucine never achieved.⁹ It's true that the halls of these famous establishments were more often occupied by great dinners rather than by the individual diner; the private rooms were especially desired. At the same time, the fame of the Rocher de Cancale¹⁰—whose perfection had been carried so far and whose fine dining and wines had qualities that the most opulent tables could not always reach—was on the rise. The Boulevard du Temple had the privilege for a long time—and it has not yet entirely lost it—to what were generally deemed to be *wild parties*: you rarely dined there alone. The Rocher de Cancale was, then, the homeland and classic sanctuary for the finest dinners, for those valuing genuine and complete superiority. The concert dinners, the cellar lunches, and all the spirit expended there were viewed only as a resounding standard.

To appear alone in these places was rather ill-advised: the solitary guest, relegated to the desert of the common hall, was neglected; he received neither the care nor the consideration of the waiters he saw passing right in front of him; he ate his food cold, and with insupportable delays. Persons of some experience did not venture into this kind of brig.

Foreigners, newcomers from the provinces and the territories, and officers passing through or on their return infallibly gathered at Legaue's and at Véry's.¹¹ These two restaurants dwelt in long pavilions on the Terrasse des Feuillants near the first entry grill of the Rue de Rivoli. They flocked into their narrow rooms; the lunches and dinners there were packed constantly. This vogue was deserved; at one of them it continued on with considerable brilliance.

At the Chaussée-d'Antin, the lunches at Café anglais; Hardy's celebrated shellfish and Riche's kidneys à la brochette attracted the young and elegant world. It was cheerfully said that "you had to be very rich to dine at Hardy's and very hardy to dine at Riche's." The Palais-Royal was then the center for all those whose lives were spent in pleasure; gathered there were the restaurateurs who made the most noise, headed by Véry and those "trois frères provençaux," whose memory will not perish. Grouped around the Palais-Royal

were distinguished houses: Beauvilliers, Robert, and that other trilogy made into a play on words by gastronomy: Rô, Méot, and Julliette. The Veau qui tette, that land of Cockaigne for the Parisian bourgeois, was also worth a mention.¹²

At that time, each house had a well-known specialty. Robert excelled in all preparations for beef and commissioned dinners; the Veau qui tette owed its prosperity to lamb trotters; there were some who praised the grilled tripe; the Frères provençaux made their fortune with cod and garlic, the illustrious *brandade*, and a cellar beyond reproach; at the Rocher de Cancale, Baleine prospered from the high quality of his wines and his excellent fish; the Cadran bleu and its gallant mysteries made a success of Henneveu.¹³ Some gourmands, more extravagant than refined, enjoyed visiting the wonders and masterpieces of each kitchen all in the same day; others amused themselves by dining backwards, beginning with the dessert and finishing with the soup: the madness of delirious bellies, indifferent to all flavors.

Orbiting around these glittering stars were quite commendable satellites and secondary planets, which had also gained a deserved popularity within the middle regions.

The special character of the Empire's restaurateurs was the care and scrupulous attention applied to every detail of the service; almost all of them had been trained in their profession by experience, both early and long. At their places, the public was handled, served with a conscientious integrity; they proved to be polite and obliging, ready to fix anything that could frustrate satisfaction or well-being. The luxury of these establishments was far from what it is today, but everything there was correct and elegant.

Evenings, the presence of these Parisian restaurants, their bright lights suddenly on display, made every movement shine, generating a vivid turbulence; everything was enhanced under this favorable influence, and the public, happy with these new assets, took ecstatic delight in them,

The years 1814 and 1815, saddened by the two invasions, were for the Palais-Royal days of great joy and jubilation. The Palais-Royal and its rotunda were a universal meeting place. The story is told of two officers, old school friends, running into each other during a cavalry charge made by two regiments: this was at Jena;¹⁴ the trumpets sounded, and the two classmates had only enough time to quickly exchange these exclamations:

"Paris!"
"After the campaign!"
"At the Palais-Royal!"
"Before the rotunda!"
"Five o'clock!"
"Day we're back!"

They were both on-time for the rendezvous, and the dangers they had gone through added to the pleasure of seeing each other again.

When the whole of Europe rushed in arms against France, all the leaders of that multitude had only one battle cry: Paris! Paris! Such was the cry they pronounced from the edge of the Rhine to the banks of the Seine. Once in Paris, what did they ask for first of all? The Palais-Royal! A young Russian officer entered there on horseback. At the Palais-Royal, what was their first wish? To sit at the tables of those restaurateurs whose names, which had come down to them in all their glory, they were citing.

We require no further testimony of what the restaurants of Paris were like under the Empire.

From 1815 to 1830 that grandeur did not appear to diminish; but perhaps, because of expansion, it was less real, less solid, and less enduring than in the previous age. Thus, the number of restaurateurs increased; these establishments, with admirable intelligence, appealed to every need and every amusement; they found their place at every level of society, and spread new comforts, the signs and traces of which had been found nowhere else, throughout our individual and general lives. This was the real and primary merit of the Parisian restaurants during these fifteen years. Have these advantages, which have all worked out for the community, lessened the delights of the privileged? For the answer to that question, we'll let the facts speak for themselves.

Old reputations antagonized young ambitions. Not being able to challenge them over the qualities that recommended the venerable houses to public favor, the new houses competed against them in two ways, through the luxury of the surroundings and the tableware, and by a drop in price. The veterans didn't collapse under these blows, but distaste sapped their energy and their zeal; some fell, but several retreated by degrees and withdrew with the spoils they'd earned. It so happened that almost all the restaurateurs—in this frenzy of growth that multiplied the new establishments—descended from the heights; mediocre houses were created everywhere and superior houses disappeared one by one.

So, for this fifteen-year period, Paris was blanketed with quite decent houses, but it saw the elite kitchens extinguish their oven fires. Some brilliant meteors passed through our space. Where are those emerging lights? And what stars have spun out of sight!

On the Boulevard du Temple weddings and banquets were all reduced to petty proportions. On the Chausse-d'Antin, for how long did those pompous dining rooms, today deserted and neglected, shine, and those sumptuous corridors so often visited by disaster! If we had to speak of everything we

no longer have and everything believed to have been replaced by gilding both within and without, it would be seen how much of our genuine assets we've lost under these splendid appearances and these glittering vanities.

When a restaurateur has set his tables in magnificent surroundings; when his service has driven to excess the pomp of his tableware, his glassware, his linens; when he has assembled all the elements of an irreproachable novelty, he thinks he's released from all other obligations; the very promises of his buffet are only a decoy. And is it surprising that the public is not taken in by these deceptions, and that it doesn't agree to pay the price for this superb magnificence that has done nothing for its general happiness! Today no one is misled or attracted any longer by this proud illusion; we wait sensibly for time to pass over all of that. The noise and quackery no longer deceive. We know the traps and devices hidden beneath those draperies; we see all the tribulations prepared for us in those private rooms so stylishly furnished and so discretely arranged; we come inside only with suspicion: we've learned all too well that all the wonders on the walls will reappear on the bill. That right there is the secret behind the ruin, so swift, of these gilded boxes and cages that we've seen collapse. We could cite one formidable example of this decadence that luxury dragged down along with it. A café, heir to a well-established reputation, received a good deal of company in the private rooms on the ground floor and the mezzanine: this was Socrates' place, always grand enough when it was full of true friends. He had an attack of vanity: he rented the first floor, constructed, gilded, and richly furnished some large dining rooms; they remained empty and were visited by bankruptcy: he had to clear out. Another came to set up shop there; but the site is cursed. No one goes there anymore.

These catastrophes did not afflict only the high flyers. Entirely abandoned districts attest to the fickle cruelty of fashion. The Boulevard de l'Hôpital, just beyond the Jardin des Plantes, erected temples to dining: l'Arc-en-ciel, le Feu éternel, and le Panier fleuri had some fine days: the popular tide had brought the fashionable world to them. We dropped by, they were already gone; the disgrace of the Boulevard du Temple had rolled them into the abyss. And what has become of the Veau qui tette, that witness to so many joyous parties, that theater for so many banquets?¹⁵

We will divide the restaurants of Paris into three classes: outside of that, no more than a hodgepodge; lower, darkness; lower still, chaos and hideous sewers. The first-class restaurants have a feature that identifies them right away; their high prices are, for them, a matter of pride. Within almost the entire commercial hierarchy, this singular aristocracy is one where a fee is paid for grandeur and loftiness. Among the

restaurateurs, this trait is more prominent than in the other professions.

These houses, almost all run with a great deal of ostentation, are never entirely defective; but they do not always rise to their reputations. In recent times, the most celebrated restaurants seemed to have faltered, only two or three still upholding their ancient honor. A pitiful spectacle was that slow and painful agony of the first of these establishments, the Rocher de Cancale, fallen from so high. The retreat of the Trois Frères provençaux either just followed or preceded this fatal event; the Café anglais was no more; the Café de Paris appeared only in the shadows; the Maison dorée never made a serious effort.¹⁶ Paris, cluttered with so many emerging restaurants over every point of its surface, found itself lacking almost any good tables. For a time, their hope for salvation rested in those two illustrious twins, separated only by a simple partition in the transverse gallery of the Palais-Royal. Alone, they bore the burden of a fame difficult to uphold; near them, the inheritors of the Trois Frères provençaux and, at the other end, the Café Corazza (of succulent origins), came to their aid, and prosperous times seem finally to have returned.¹⁷ We do not hesitate to reiterate that, in our opinion, you are less well treated by the restaurateurs than you were formerly. Preparations and seasonings assume a depressing uniformity. Two sauces reappear constantly: one is brown, it represents the gravies and the ices;¹⁸ the other is white and yellowish, it's used for all the fricassées. All that's brown isn't yellow, and all that's yellow isn't brown: it's impossible to depart from those limitations. The names of these two inevitable sauces vary and are transformed with an ease and agility that answers all needs. Accidents from dubious dishes derived from highly sensitive foods—like eggs, fish, and game—have become more frequent. The quality of the wine has suffered from harsh assaults: driven from the kitchen, integrity has not found refuge in the cellar.

Without doubt, there are honorable exceptions; but the general condition has been altered and is deteriorating more and more.

First-class restaurants have made notable progress in another area; the special dinners they formerly held were affairs of cardboard and artificial flowers, the burden of which they have shaken off, and their meals, now enhanced by everything that can enliven them, have boldly headed down the habitual path of the elegant and comfortable life. Apart from the indelible differences, we do not hesitate to place the special dinners of our top restaurateurs above the best of the city's tables.

One example, which we borrow from a book authoritative in gastronomic matters, sheds light on this truth. This was at

the Rocher de Cancale. It began with six small Marennes oysters and enough spoonfuls of soup to neutralize their chilly sensation; several soups were sampled, followed by the glass of Madeira. The first-class service was worthy from the start. The narrator expresses his admiration as follows: "It wasn't that there was a great number of plates; but they were so well modulated, and the style, the aspect, the freshness, the force, and the flavor were so excellent that everyone had to admire them." The historian complains here that as a palette cleanser a punch à la romaine was used rather than a rum sorbet.¹⁹

He adds: "We were served with warmed silverware in perfect taste, with English plate, and in brilliant candlelight." He then cites some exquisite dishes, and next claims, "The rest of the small and magnificent dinner was perfect. If you want to get an idea of it," he says, "imagine M. de Talleyrand or Lorenzo de Medici giving a dinner for nine of his gourmet friends."²⁰ We'll take enthusiasm's role into consideration in such praise, but it could still have been given without being charged with exaggeration.

The chronicles of the old Rocher de Cancale are full of exploits of this kind. That dinner, given by Lord W—and shared by nine guests, cost 100 francs a head. We'll match it with a truly original dinner M. Romieu gave some years ago. He wrote Borel in the morning to have ready for him at two o'clock, for six persons, cabbage soup, beef, bacon and sausage, pork and beans, a mutton stew with potatoes, a goose stuffed with chestnuts, a lamb's lettuce salad, and an apple tart, coarse country bread, spare linen, pewter place settings, earthenware and common glass. . . . For wines, the most expensive of all that was there.²¹

M. Romieu had adopted for his meals, even at restaurants, a practice originated by M. Jules Didot,²² who in summer dined in white jackets and in winter in nightgowns for all of his guests.

One day a batman from the ministry, having seen M. Romieu and his companions in that get-up, reported that he had discovered him dining among Turks.

Another time, three gamblers went to find Borel and told him: "After having won a lot, we lost almost everything; for all of our profit, we've got nothing left but this 1,000 franc note. We'd like to eat it up in one meal." The honest restaurateur pointed out to them that their wish was no easier to fulfill than that of the grenadier who asked for coffee at six francs a cup. They insisted. It did no good to demonstrate to them that the thing wasn't possible, that at the very least the number of guests would have to be increased; all objections were useless. They began to think about what there was that was most expensive. A singular idea came to one of them. It was the month of December during a cold wave that had frozen

all the waterways. He proposed eating a plate of frogs, going to fish for them after breaking through the ice. For this expedition they brought together fifty workers, who asked for five hundred francs for a hundred frogs, which were made into a soup that no one touched.

At *Trois Frères provençaux*, a dinner for wine lovers was established in the justly celebrated cellars of that restaurant.

The great dinners at the first-class cook-caterers play a considerable role today among our customary practices; no longer do just the banquets, birthdays, and professional corporations take over the beautiful dining-rooms built for that purpose; there are intimate dinners as well; what was known for a long time only at the *Rocher de Cancale* can now be experienced everywhere.

Second-class restaurants are numerous; they can be found in almost all the popular districts. They favor the wider streets, the boulevards; many of them are at the *Palais-Royal*, next to the three or four chosen ones always in demand by the dining aristocracy. Sometimes these restaurants deploy greater luxury than those above them; but they do not have the secret for excellent dishes, they only offer things that are scrupulously good. The wines especially, at these places, never depart from this estimable mediocrity.

At the third rank, we will place a still larger number of houses that are commendable but cannot meet the necessary expense to raise their level and serve with distinction; they huddle together in a lower class and have no more than a single ambition, to do little things well. There is generally some honesty at these middle regions; less of a show is made there than at the top, and less deception than at the bottom.

These second- and third-class restaurants are those the ordinary diner haunts; their public is composed of that common crowd that lives placidly between opulence and poverty: it's the temperate zone of the social sphere.

In the first-class dining rooms, even those on the ground floor, figures from all the high social stations are found; the nobility, dignitaries, and those of intellectual distinction converge there. Foreign families come there to have their meals; the manners and tone of these colonies of visitors indicate the rank they occupy in their own countries. It is in the first-class restaurants where those opulent fortunes of a day are seen, enjoying a few prosperous hours as if they owned an eternity of wealth. There also the vanity of the snob and the haughtiness of the fool strut across the tiles.

By tacit agreement, for which the grounds would be difficult to explain, the three classes of restaurants are devoted to this or that meal. Lunches at the *Rocher de Cancale* went out of fashion; you lunched at *Véry's* in the *Tuileries*: you lunched no more at *Véry's* at the *Palais-Royal*; at the *Trois*

Frères provençaux lunch was almost unknown; lunches at *Tortoni's* and *Corazza's* were always popular and done well; the prize for regular and special lunches belongs to *Tortoni*; the *Café de Chartres*, *Véfour*, inherited all the lunches of the wood- and glass-paneled galleries. At the *Palais-Royal*, supper was taken at all hours; if nights at the *Café anglais* are excepted, supper was taken at the *Chaussée-d'Antin* only intermittently.²³

In recent years, the *Rocher de Cancale* wanted to resume its concert lunches. No one understood what that meant; it was an anachronism.

For a number of persons, a life spent dining in restaurants is an absolute requirement; the uncertainty of the hours and the need to cover expenses turns, in certain situations, this habit into a harsh law. We don't hesitate to say that for these people, whatever may be the delights they gather around themselves, this life generates only satiety and disgust. It works only for some blasé bellies that have gotten used to it, pretty much like *Mithridates*²⁴ got used to poison.

These particular drawbacks are amply redeemed by the advantages the restaurateur's presence offers to the greater number. The range of times is itself a valuable asset for business and for pleasure; travelers and the wandering public find at every turn a hospitality always ready to welcome them and for which they can easily gauge the price.

For the purpose of observation and for people who make a simple entertainment out of dining out, it is a resource whose extent, in some way, is almost impossible to measure. The whole of society comes to pass under the gaze of the diner, who contemplates and studies it at its most expansive. It's hardly worth even trying to give an idea of this picture, so constantly in motion. It's not the formal society of the salons, the busy world of the streets, the poses and pretensions of the boulevard promenade, the concerns of the concert hall; it is a multitude struggling with sensations that have carried it away despite itself. To follow the gradations of conversation at neighboring tables is a study full of interest. Usually the early stages are reserved and restrained. People don't speak, they observe themselves and the others; but soon uninhibited emotion emerges, stands up, and is revealed: a general confession and one of the most entertaining. It is said that in dreams we all speak about what interests us the most; the same is true about the outpourings over a meal. (Every intrigue that is prudent and discreet, whether a matter of interest or of gallantry, sentiment or opinion, ought to be dining in a private room.) That the series of figures is unending and is renewed incessantly increases still more the charm of this spectacle: there are groups of burlesques, there are isolated caricatures of all ages, of all figures, and of every

nuance; the characters on the stage have nothing to match this variety. At every moment, the panels of this magic lantern change and the images are renewed. At the restaurants, a freedom of appearance and manner also reigns, which, for those burdened by the yoke of relations and conventions, is still a victory and a joy. The silence of some, the chatting of others; embarrassment, timidity, clumsiness, audacity, aplomb, impudence even, cries of impatience, transports of satisfaction, all those facial features so diverse and shaken by so many passions; the tastes, the obsessions, the surprise, the disappointments, the raptures, the anger of these here and the bliss of those there, all form a succession of sudden contrasts, full of attraction.

To really enjoy this feature, you must not stop on the threshold, i.e. in the front dining rooms; you have to penetrate as far as possible into the sanctuary.

All those who frequent the first-class dining rooms do not run up a tremendous expense; there are lions who disrupt an entire house to have a cutlet served, a compote, or a carafe of ice water. You are not ever isolated in a restaurant, without even mentioning that ebb and flow of eaters who leave not a single seat vacant; you meet, you gather together, you bond, like in a coach. At Véry's and at the Café de Paris, we've seen societies of diners seated as if in a refectory, where each eats his share; they were quite cheerful there, and more than one witty fellow found his dinner at the point of his barbs.

Certain delicate natures have difficulty getting used to the shock of the smells emanating from these dishes, from these substances and foods so numerous and so intermingled. There are also harsh contrasts: a diner who's beginning and a diner who's finishing are ill-served by their proximity; the bowl of soup and the fingerbowl take a dim view of each other.

These infirmities are those of the public life.

Below the third class, no other places are to be found except those where dinner is an occupation devoid of all sensuality; headed there are the good people who eat to please an appetite and satisfy a need. The houses serving this purpose are numberless and colorless; however, truth leads us to recognize that in these places there is less distance between price and value than in the superior class; the benefit diminishes with the quality; but we also think there's more integrity in the small markets than in the large. The fourth-class restaurateurs come very close to those for whom it is no longer possible to assign a rank.

Along this extreme frontier, the bourgeois kitchen, a kind of Maritornes²⁵ of the dirty apron, can be found, and here the uniformity of the table suits only those mechanical bellies

that, like the mortar harried by the pestle, grind and digest without sensing a thing.

Beyond the bourgeois kitchen lie the cheapest eating houses. At certain hours of the day, these houses, populated lunch and dinner by workers, present a spectacle, swarming like that of a mass of insects. If the table isn't bare, it's covered with a shockingly stained cloth. Mornings, the bowls are filled and a course of ragout is served; at three o'clock boiled beef and vegetables are eaten; wine is paid for separately, and you bring your own bread. In some of these places, the low nature of these dishes can only be matched by the voracity with which they are swallowed. Elsewhere, in this respect, progress is evident, foods are of sound quality.

There are two kinds of these eating houses, quite distinct. In one, there's a pretense towards luxury and refinement; favored dishes are made: rabbit, venison and game stews, hashes, ragouts, and the harlequin,²⁶ that *olla podrida* of the Parisian bohemian, flourish there. Slipping into these perfidious preparations are also the pseudo-rabbits, the venison of the Montfaucon²⁷ charnel houses, fish fresh from the gutters, and desserts picked from the dumps, and for some time now, goats in sheep's clothing. The second kind of "ordinary" are meals soundly composed of roasted and boiled meats, everyday vegetables, and common fish; in these, everything is healthy and sound. Our epicures scorn these places and prefer what they call the good stews.

Generally, working and service people are well-fed in Paris; only the lazy and the debauched are exposed to the rubbish. But it needs to be added that if there's one fraud in the popular diet against which nothing can shield common consumption, it's the wine; it flows in the gutters, like water in the rivers, for everyone. The rich don't always escape these tricks, but the poor are delivered over to them without mercy.²⁸ The worker's meal is infected with adulterated wine just as the porter's lunch is afflicted with tampered milk.

Thirty years ago here is what a dining hall where coachmen took their meals was like. You came in preceded or followed by a girl armed with an enormous tin-plated copper ladle filled with a greasy water called bouillon; the hall was an enclosure contained within four walls blackened from top to bottom; the table was long and narrow; the cups and beakers were tin-plate, the silverware iron; the meals there were frugal, but not bad. These customs have undergone some superficial modifications, but the substance is the same.

The backrooms, the mezzanines, and sometimes the first floors of wine merchants host spirited feasts; but almost always the cured and smoked meats bear the costs for these often quite appetizing meals, which share none of the revolting habits of the cheap eating houses.

As for those places where the soup was served from a hole carved into the table and where the bouillon was distributed from the piston of a horse syringe, these are memories as historic as those of Mother Camus.²⁹

In the lower depths, the sleazy dumps and the greasy spoons are found. We do not venture into these dens, and we will make them known by a single feature. M. Gisquet,³⁰ being chief of police, during heat waves ordered an assessment of the meat offered for sale by the pork butchers, too often left hanging out for far too long; those corrupted meats were thrown away as garbage into a mass grave: the next day, not a trace of them still remained; all had been removed during the night. And so it was with the spoiled fish and all the leftovers that had been thrown into the outlying dumps; it's this macédoine that takes the spirited name of "harlequin." The cheaper restaurants with good taste buy the debris off of the great tables sold by the servants.

In these dives, the face of the working class, in all its aspects, naïve or perverse, with its good or bad instincts, with its tendencies and inclinations, has an open vitality of singular energy, the vigorous expression of which is heated up and developed by drunkenness.

Parisian restaurants have their own prescribed districts. Rue Montorgueil and its oyster lunches and seafood;³¹ Bercy and its eel-and-fish stews; the neighborhoods around the central market with their cuts of butcher's meat and the always fresh fish; the Champs-Élysées and its country menus, all form so many separate countries, all with their native customs.

There's another family of restaurants, the offspring of which are surprisingly numerous; we'd like to talk about the prix-fixe restaurants. The first-class ones are at two francs: that's the first of the seductions to which foreigners and provincials succumb. A choice of four dishes, complemented by soup and dessert, a half-bottle of wine, and all the negotiated exchanges that can be carried out attract and dazzle them like fool's gold. New clerks, worn-out dandies, doctors without patients and lawyers without briefs, the young writer whose first article was posted that morning, the provincial actors waiting for work at the Palais-Royal, and non-commissioned officers on-the-town decorate the two-franc tables. Sundays, the hosier meets up for pleasure there with his lady, his young man, and his girls. From this price, passing through all the levels and from one reduction to the next, it falls to eighty centimes, with two or three dishes, soup, dessert, and a small carafe of wine. Within the abyss of the prix-fixe are absorbed all of the butcher's low trade and all the suspect supplies. A few years ago the notices for these restaurants specified day-by-day the delicacies and the small plates promised by the menu for the entire week. The

public for these smaller prix-fixe dinners is composed particularly of those going by the name of "poor wretches," whom everyone knows and no one ever defines. The regulars at these tables always eat a lot of bread, which they get on request; they are so unsure about the next day that, for them, stuffing their bellies is like filling their pockets. An emerging literature has taken note of these races of raptors and rodents. The prix-fixes proliferate especially in the Latin Quarter and the neighborhoods around the Palais-Royal. We have mentioned that those of the lowest rank compete at Montfaucon to supply their pantries.

In the Latin Quarter, next to the prix-fixe but beneath it, stand the dirt-cheap restaurants, with a maximum of thirty centimes a dish at the disposal of the gentlemen-scholars. That solemn moment of the day, which kitchen and restaurant staffs call the "lunch (or dinner) rush," runs its course with unparalleled violence; young appetites pounce upon the substantial dishes with a fury. There's a general cry of distress when the chef proclaims in a resounding voice that terrible sentence: "There's no more beef!" Two or three restaurants on the Rue de la Harpe and Rue Saint-Jacques, at the head of which we place Rousseau and Flicoteau—the immortal Flicoteau whose dynasty founded its fief near the Place de la Sorbonne—are distinguished among all the others.³² On the tables, the carafes are gigantic; the wine within is what you'd expect to be there.

Priggish pedants, a species not yet extinct, fill the gaps left by the students.

Near the Palais-Royal³³ something similar to the Latin Quarter restaurants has been created for the artistic world. There also, at the dinner hour, clouds of voracious locusts, taking off from the tavern and the studio, can be seen flocking into Rouget's and its like, swooping down on all the combinations of roast or boiled beef, of veal and of lamb in all of its simplest varieties. In these parts, wine is known, but only in small doses, in little carafes or quarter bottles.

The restaurant waiter forms a class separate from all the other categories of service; there are waiters who age along with the house, and from whom the secrets, the clientele, and all the wiles of the seraglio can keep nothing hidden; for a major establishment, these old servers are priceless; they know so much they are not easily fooled. When a waiter is intelligent, profit and satisfaction will follow when he is allowed to take the lead; if he's had proof of your generosity, and if you've been congenial and polite with him, he will serve you with zeal and good taste: don't annoy him and rely on his knowledge. When the parsimony or bad humor of those he is serving irritate a waiter, there is no end to the tribulations he invents to antagonize his victim: he proves

to be both ingenious and barbarous in the torments he inflicts upon him. General rule: to be happy with the waiter, make sure the waiter is happy with you.

In the private and reserved rooms the waiter's service is more intimate; it requires more mutual trust. The mysteries of the restaurants are not the least interesting chapter among the mysteries of Paris; the waiters fathom them all; but they are discreet. Occasions for laughter are often available to them, when in the ingénue of the day they recognize the coquette of the evening who they will perhaps see with a new admirer tomorrow. The memoirs of a private-room waiter would contain spicy revelations; he'd be a Gil Blas³⁴ in an apron.

There are model waiters for whom a single glance says everything and makes everything clear and understood. Chéron, at Véry's, served in private all the men of substance, who treated him with a benevolent familiarity; the young women all smiled when passing before him; and, for the profligate, he was an informal banker who discounted the menu. Chéron was like the slaves of Lucullus;³⁵ the private room where the table needed to be set was indicated to him, and that was enough, everything was said. Chéron died without leaving a successor.

The restaurant waiter should be nimble, alert, quick to respond, clean, charming, a little bit of the picaresque and of Frontinus;³⁶ he needs to have a certain refinement in his language and bearing; he's youthful; formerly in a powdered wig, today curled quite naturally with a hot iron. If the white cravat gets lost, it will be found again around the neck of a waiter. He should never be embarrassed; regardless of whether he comes or doesn't come when called, it is essential that he's never at fault. He has two replies always at hand for requests that prove embarrassing to him: "Sir, it's not yet there!" or better still: "Sir, there's no more!" And also the famous "Voilà!" which is an answer to everything.

In 1837 for the supper at City Hall during the ball held for the newly married Duc d'Orléans,³⁷ the prefect for the Seine had the table served by a brigade of restaurant waiters under the command of Chéron; the service was admirably prompt. This method is followed in the Tuileries and in several great houses.

The waiter is especially admirable during his rush hours; he is everywhere, serving twenty tables at once; he carries stacks of dishes with the skill of the most accomplished tight-rope walker, without breaking a thing; he forgets nothing, knows how to fix and manage everything. In these moments he lets his voice ring out like a mule proudly ringing his bell.³⁸

Especially on Sundays, when everything bends and bows under the invasion of the bourgeois, the waiter appears in all

his glory. In those solemn moments when a waiter calls out to you, "Right away, sir!" you've been condemned to a very long wait.

The customary offering to the waiter is worked out like this: five percent of the bill's total in the dining rooms; ten percent in the private rooms. There are numerous exceptions to this rule, to which each is his own judge.

The provinces still do not understand the tip, this tax which has leached into every detail of Parisian life.

The ladies and misses of the counter, the entire feminine side of the service, are enthroned there or flirting about, and the dishes they write down they season with shy glances and smiles; the further down you go, the bolder this game becomes. The small prix-fixes are served by women known as "girls."

Two scourges afflict restaurants: theft and credit; waiters rarely fail to detect petty theft and thieves; they have an exquisite flair for just that; they know all of Cartouche's tricks,³⁹ which the multiplicity of mirrors almost always expose; as for credit, that's more difficult, especially when it is hidden beneath a decent, elegant, and polished surface. The story's been told about Véry who, having been duped over a bill of thirty francs by one of these moneyless gastronomes, reproached him first for having dined too well and then for having chosen him as his host:

"Listen," he told him, "I'll forgive you, but on one condition; that you go and do exactly the same for my neighbor Véfour."

"Alas," replied the diner, "he's the one who sent me here to pay for the bill I left there."

These unfortunate events do not prevent a good number of restaurateurs, especially at the summits, from making quick and considerable fortunes. It is true that at the secondary and lower sectors the list of disasters is long.

There are improvisational restaurateurs: wine merchants who have risen to that position; in Paris there exists many illustrious examples of such advancement.

In the first-class dining rooms guests of modest appearance are often seen; but far more often, at the humblest of restaurants, pompous displays of grooming are to be found. Our fathers' saying is thus still true: "Velvet on the back, bran in the belly."

For humankind dinner seems to empty the heart while filling the belly. A poor beggar, seated on the first step of the stairs to the Trois Frères provençaux for the last thirty years, always received alms from those going up, never from those coming down.

The Parisian restaurateurs are charitable. Every morning they distribute to the poor the leftovers from the bread and the meals of the previous night.⁴⁰ ©

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Allen S. Weiss's introduction to the abridged *Mercure de France* edition (Briffault 2003, 7).
2. Briffault begins the chapter with a lengthy citation, not included here, from an article published in 1813 by V.-J. Etienne de Jouy in the *Gazette de France*, describing a 1757 dinner at A la Croix de Malte.
3. One of the most thorough discussions of the genesis of the Parisian restaurant can be found in Rebecca L. Stange's *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (2000). Her choice for the first true "restaurateur" is Mathurin Roze de Chantoiseau, who founded his "restaurant" in 1766. Briffault's candidate, "Lamy," is not mentioned in Spange, although "un certain Lamy" is referred to in other nineteenth-century accounts as having established the first restaurant in the Palais Royal in 1770.
4. I have borrowed Stange's translation of "traiteur," which nowadays is translated as "caterer." But the "traiteur" of Briffault's time and before played a wider and more various role (often regulated and restricted), occasionally running establishments similar to inns or tables d'hôte.
5. Antoine Beauvilliers opened his first restaurant in the mid-1780s and then Le Grande Taverne de Londres (1782), perhaps the first true luxury restaurant in Paris. He is best known as the author of *L'art du cuisinier* (1814).
6. First in 1814, and then after Napoleon's 100 days, in 1815.
7. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin is the author of *Physiologie du goût* (1825), an essential work in gastronomic history. Briffault cites here the opening of "Meditation 18."
8. This observation is very close to a similar one in Brillat-Savarin (*Physiologie du goût*, "Meditation 28," no. 139). Briffault occasionally borrows from his predecessor, not always with attribution.
9. Of these, the Cadran bleu was the most renowned. Founded in the eighteenth century by Jean-Baptiste Henneveu, it was known in the next century for hosting wedding receptions and its private dinners. Vautrin and Madame Cibot were among Balzac's characters who paid it a visit.
10. Founded in 1804 by Alexis Baleine, Le Rocher de Cancale was celebrated for its seafood, as well as its singing-society dinners and wine-cellar banquets. A good deal of the *Human Comedy*'s population, as well as Balzac and other celebrated authors, dined there (see especially Muhlstein 2010, 44–57).
11. Chez Véry, which moved to the Palais-Royal in 1801, was famous during the Empire for its elegance and expense. Rubempré, in *Illusions perdues*, lost a good deal of his illusions (and francs) there. Legaue lasted only until 1817 (see Muhlstein 2010, 41–44; Courtine 1984, 15).
12. Listed here and in the preceding paragraph are the names of most of those restaurants that transformed Napoleon's Paris into the restaurant capital of the world.
13. According to Brillat-Savarin, Cadran bleu owed its prosperity to "the mysterious fourth-floor boudoirs" (*Physiologie du goût*, "Meditation 28," no. 143).
14. The battle of Jena, between French and Prussian-Saxon forces, actually took place in 1806.
15. Of the restaurants in this paragraph, the most prominent was Veau qui tette, which traced its origins back to a sixteenth-century butcher shop. The "disgrace" is probably a reference to the attempted assassination of Louis-Philippe I (July 25, 1835), which led to the deaths of eighteen people.
16. Le Rocher de Cancale closed in 1846, but opened at another location, where a restaurant of that name still exists. Trois Frères provençaux, established in 1786, was sold in 1836 and lost much of its character; it regained its reputation in the Second Empire, under Adolphe Dugléré, but closed in 1869. The fame of Café anglais,

founded in 1802, may have diminished when it was sold by the Delaunay family, but it regained its reputation in 1866 when Dugléré took over its kitchen (Babette, of *Babette's Kitchen*, found a home there along with many writers—from Dumas to Proust—and their characters). The first Café de Paris opened in 1802, became the height of fashion around 1840, then faded in the following decades, closing in 1856. Maison dorée, built over the foundation of Café Hardy and opened around 1840, became one of the Second Empire's more elegant restaurants and lasted until the end of the century. (Many contemporary recollections of these restaurants can be found in Courtine, *passim*.)

17. The "twins" is likely a reference to Véfour (not the Grand Véfour, opened later in the century) situated between numbers 79 and 82 at the Galerie Beaujolois and Véry, in the same Galerie at 83 to 86. Frequented by Jacobins during the Revolution and later by the young Napoleon, Café Corazza was primarily a café and ice-cream shop until it was turned into a restaurant by Eugène Douix, a former chef of Charles X.

18. "les glaces" in the original. This seems odd. Could Briffault have meant "les gelées"?

19. "Punch à la romaine" is more like an alcoholic frozen lemonade than a punch. It has the distinction of being the last "punch" served the night the Titanic sunk.

20. Briffault cites here a passage from *Encyclopédie des gens du monde* (1837, 8:233–34), describing a dinner given by a "Lord W.," and likely written by Frédéric Fayot (co-author of *Les classiques de la table*).

21. Auguste Romieu was a writer and became Director of Fine Arts under Louis-Napoleon, and he was also the author of *Code gourmand: Manuel complet de gastronomie* (1827). Pierre Borel succeeded Baleine as the proprietor of Le Rocher de Cancale.

22. This is probably the Jules Didot who was a member of a well-known family of publishers, printers, and typographers.

23. Café Tortoni, which like Carozza began as an ice-cream shop, was celebrated throughout the nineteenth century for the writers and artist who were its patrons. It appears not only in Balzac, but also in the fictions of Stendhal, Maupassant, and Proust. Café de Chartres was purchased by Véfour in 1820, and the name "Café de Chartres" still appears in its frontage at the Palais-Royal.

24. Mithridates, an Eastern monarch during the time of the Roman Republic, was said to have acquired an immunity to poison by taking small doses of toxins throughout his life.

25. Maritornes is an innkeeper's misshapen servant who one night winds up in Don Quixote's bed: "Neither touch, nor smell, nor anything else about the good lass that would have made any but a carrier vomit, were enough to undeceive him" (Part I, chap. xvi).

26. "Arlequin is the name given to the refuse of the kitchens, mixed indiscriminately. Everything is to be met with in this disgusting compound—bones badly gnawed, legs of fowls, backbones and heads of fish, with lumps of fat" (*Colburn's New Monthly Magazine* 1849, 87:465).

27. Montfaucon, Paris's great charnel house, was where much of its horse population was laid to rest.

28. In his first chapter, Briffault hints at the dilution of Parisian wine, the consumption of which he estimates at 115 liters annually per person: "This quantity is for real wine, introduced legally . . . but who can say how much it's been expanded by fraud and industry. The wine-producing council estimates water sold for wine at 500,000 hectoliters. This is still only a probable figure."

29. Jacques Arago (1842, 71–72) tells of a restaurant on rue de la Mortellerie where bouillon is served (and removed from those who cannot pay) "à l'aide d'une seringue." *La Mere Camus* (1803) was a vaudeville comedy written by M.-N. Balisson Rougemont.

30. Henri Gisquet, Prefect of Police for Paris from 1831 to 1836, was known for his excessive zeal, particularly during the 1832 cholera epidemic when he was responsible for public health.
31. The site of Le Rocher de Cancale.
32. Restaurant Rousseau (“where so few bottles and so many water carafes were emptied under the proprietorship of Rousseau the Aquatic”) appears in Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (chap. II, “Marius Poor”). A substantial description of its rival, Flicoteau, can be found in Balzac’s *Illusions perdues* (Part I).
33. On the rue de Valois, to be precise, “where earlier literature in distress found pasture. I really believe that you always eat at Rouget, but do you dine there?” (Villemot 1858, 2:68).
34. The eponymous hero of the eighteenth-century picaresque novel by Alain René Lesage.
35. Lucius Lucinius Lucullus, one of the late Republic’s wealthiest generals and politicians, was known for his extravagance, and Plutarch, in his *Lives*, describes how his mere mention of a particular dining room was sufficient for the servants to determine the nature and expense of an upcoming banquet.
36. Sextus Julius Frontinus was a first-century (AD) aristocrat best known for his technical expertise and tenure as Commissioner of Waterworks.
37. The marriage of Ferdinand Philippe d’Orléans, the royal prince and oldest son of Louis-Philippe I, was one of the major political and social events of the July Monarchy. The wedding itself was at Fontainebleau.

38. This would seem to be a reference to La Fontaine’s “Two Mules,” although the proud mule who “faisait sonner sa sonnette” does come to a bad end.
39. Louis Dominique Garthausen, or “Cartouche,” was the iconic highwayman of his day. He was captured and executed in 1721.
40. Briffault ends his chapter with another lengthy citation, also not included here, from *Voyage au Pole Sud* (1844) by Jules Dumont d’Urville, describing a Chinese banquet.

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