

Dinner in the Current Age: A Translation from *Paris à table*

Abstract: Preceding this annotated translation of the chapter “Dinner in the Current Age” from Eugène Briffault’s 1846 work *Paris à table* is a brief introduction summarizing the author’s professional career, contextualizing the text into the literature of the time, and suggesting his objective for the chapter and the book. The translated chapter begins with a look back at previous decades up to the author’s time to examine the evolution of dinner at the higher levels of society and among the professions, including the various factors affecting it, such as uncertain financial conditions and tourism. The author follows with a look at dinners held in the world of theater, mentioning the kinds of meals prepared by celebrated artists, like Rachel and Talma, of his and previous times. Descending the social ladder, he then focuses his

attention on the “bourgeois” dinner and the role of women cooks in its preparation, both of which meet with his approval. On the other hand, the “parvenu’s” dinner meets with his extreme disapproval, and from there he gladly turns to dinner among shopkeepers and merchants, workers and laborers, finishing with several anecdotes that present models for hosts and guests as well as stories describing some of the follies that can occur at the dinner table. Illustrating the article are portraits of the author, Briffault, and several of the Bertall engravings that illustrated the original text.

Keywords: Briffault, Bertall, gastronomy, Paris, dinner.

Introduction

PUBLISHED IN 1846, *PARIS À TABLE* is occasionally mentioned along with Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du goût* (1825) and Dumas’s *Grand dictionnaire de cuisine* (1873) as one of the seminal works for the study of nineteenth-century gastronomy.¹ In fact, in a *Le Monde* review (July 25, 2003) 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 *Diable 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 such artists as Gavarni, Daumier, and Bertall.

His contribution to one of these 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 the culinary scene in Paris at a time when gastronomy had become a considerable object of interest to French writers, journalists, and intellectuals. Perhaps beginning with the culinary activities of Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière—whose *L’Almanach des gourmands*, published from 1803 to 1812, was sort of a combination guidebook, restaurant critique, and gastronomic treatise—a connection was forged between literary endeavor and eating, one “that so profoundly marked French civilization of the nineteenth



FIGURE 1: Portrait of Eugène Briffault by Charles Philippon from *Galerie de la presse, de la littérature et des beaux-arts: première série*, ed. Louis Huart (Paris: Aubert, 1839).

century": "Cuisine became an object of discourse. The press and literature, both large and small, seized on it like a serious matter" (Aron 1973: 14–15; see also Spang 2000 and Ory 1997).

By Briffault's time, Brillat-Savarin had already provided a foundation for the social and cultural study of gastronomy; Antonin Carême, perhaps the first celebrity chef, had converted his deep and practical knowledge of cooking and taste into popular volumes (in particular, *L'Art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle*, 1833–47); novelists like Balzac and Paul de Kock were constructing scenes around the consumption of food; popular writers and journalists—like Jacques Arago (*Comme on dine à Paris*, 1842) and Victor Bouton (*La Table à Paris, mystères des restaurants, cafés et comestibles*, 1845)—were passing judgment on contemporary dining in pamphlets and periodical literature. The first journal devoted to gastronomy, Paul Lacroix's *Le Gastronom*, was launched in 1830.

Briffault's book was one of the most various and comprehensive of these efforts. Lavishly illustrated by the prolific



FIGURE 2: Frontispiece by Bertall from the 1846 edition of *Paris à table*, which according to Georges Vicaire is, sans doute, a portrait of the author (Bibliographie gastronomique, Paris: Rouquette et fils, 1890, 115).

caricaturist Bertall (Charles Albert d'Arnou), *Paris à table* was popular enough to be printed in two editions (1846 and 1851), but although it was occasionally used as a guidebook, its author was not much interested in reviewing restaurants or in the preparation of individual dishes (there are no recommendations or recipes in this book). Harkening back to Brillat-Savarin (from whom he occasionally borrowed both ideas and phrasing), Briffault was determined, rather, to construct a social and cultural portrait of culinary Paris. "What a people eats . . . is known," he writes 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" (Briffault 1846: 4).

The chapter translated here, "Dinner in the Current Age," is the third chapter in the book, and it is as fragmented, aphoristic, and anecdotal as all of the others. But it is also one of the more concentrated of them, and as much as any of the other chapters, it observes and displays the "intimate customs" and habits of the Parisian dinner, linking

them with the current times (and the recent past), with economic good fortune and adversity, and with the various levels of society, with a particular emphasis on the “bourgeois” dinner. (For this translation, I have retained Briffault’s usage of “bourgeois,” a term which seems to have had a fairly wide application in his time, referring, in general, to any city dweller not a member of the aristocracy or the laboring class.) Yet, despite his interest in (and his occasional fondness for) the bourgeois table, Briffault’s scope remains wide. As with his chapter on “The Restaurants of Paris,” which descended from the most celebrated establishments to, eventually, the lowest dives, Briffault begins here with the luxurious and the sumptuous. But he is soon reporting on lesser classes of diners—from the higher professions, through the artistic community, down to the worker eating hastily in the streets—to achieve another objective he had established in his introduction: “There will be no sanctuary impervious to our efforts, we will go sit down at every table, by the side of the most powerful and the most humbled, with the voluptuous and with the artisan and the laborer. We will be at every celebration: the palace, the mansion, the social circles, the tavern, the dining rooms of bankers and restaurateurs, the cabaret and the backroom, the attic, the workshop, the dive . . . diligent to capture nature in the act, like those who, to study animals, choose the moment they devour their prey” (Briffault 1846: 12–13).²

Dinner in the Current Age

BY EUGÈNE BRIFFAULT

The dinner in the current age has, more than those that have preceded it, an appearance of its own; it has proven to be highly sophisticated about its own well-being. The Empire’s tables and those of the Restoration tried to connect with former times;³ our table, with greater independence and reason, has proven to be freer and more ingenious than what it had formerly been. Under the Empire and the Restoration, the service and the cuisine had neither enough invention nor novelty; they revived and followed the old traditions, and were unwilling to see that there were useful directions elsewhere than in France. Today everything is ventured, and we take openly from foreign lands whatever we find to be good and pleasing in their practices.

The special character of our table is a cosmopolitanism unknown to others.

Remember that a few years before 1830, land speculation, compensation for the émigrés, and certain military procurements lent a feverish bustle of activity to what we call “the

floating fortune”; the conversion of interest rates carried over this shifting and searing ground those fortunes that, up to then, seemed to have been the most stable and untroubled.⁴ The imaginary credit and fanciful hopes—about which article 405 of the penal code speaks with such disrespect—were then very much in favor.⁵ Luxury, not only that which is displayed outwardly for one’s own gratification but also that which is shared with others, has always been one of the most powerful means of seduction. What fraudulent disasters were concealed behind dinners and balls! What failures, bankruptcies, deceits, breaches of trust, and embezzlement of funds were uncovered the day after a celebration! When these financial crises shake up a country, dining proceeds with a fury. The most modest hurl themselves fearlessly forward; each spends what he has and what he doesn’t have. Life is lived sumptuously on credit; in anticipation of profit, hopes are devoured; it is a necessity to appear wealthy, no matter the cost; everyone gives dinners. That first euphoria, which troubled wiser heads and brought into our furnishings and onto our tables an affectation for opulence and prodigality beyond all measure, needs to be traced back to the time of that effervescence. The profusion of these catastrophes is well known; it was a moment when the whole of society was bankrupt.

Something similar to that excessive situation is happening now.

The mania over silent partnerships, the striving, the political fortunes, the corruption, and the scandal produced in Parisian life a boiling ferment that egoism, greed, and the worship of self-interest and material pleasure intensified to a singular degree. In this second outburst, we went much further than in the first; our dinners marched in the front ranks of this senseless pomp.

So, this luxury we’ve described above extended everywhere, and became in many ways a standard practice; what had been the privilege of Fortune’s elect descended into the middle classes, forced to follow the headlong rush of those adventurous spirits who set the course for our life and its business. It’s been alleged that this inflammatory disease has subsided, and that society has resumed its normal bearing and detests today what it loved with such violence. We want to believe in this reversion; but these convulsions left such deep scars, they changed the very appearance of our manners.

Tourism exerted another influence over our dinners. Throughout all of Europe, vast caravansaries were established, veritable palaces that adorn our cities, and line our roads and rivers with splendor. The steam engine shook up the world, and the longest voyages no longer frighten anyone; distance vanished, and populations visit one another as



FIGURE 3: “The French . . . from their eagerness to import exotic customs [had] perhaps gone astray.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

country neighbors did once before. Manners intermingled; thanks to living together and speaking all languages, we became familiar with all traditions, and each brought home the best of what had been seen among others. The French, so scornful of foreign practices and so vain about their own superiority, had from their eagerness to import exotic customs perhaps gone astray. That being said, before traveling through the world of Parisian diners, we have to acknowledge the two principal features of our current table: exorbitant luxury and extravagant cosmopolitanism.

Below the very heights, distinctions have become difficult to establish formally. Dining well is almost the same everywhere; however, there are nuances that the trained eye can still capture.

When our ministers wish to assume a royal air, you will see the poverty of the service in the fatigue and clumsiness of the servants as they strive to duplicate themselves. A few great houses—those under the names of Noailles, Montmorency, and La Trémouille, ambassadors fond of displays worthy of their rank, name, and country—would know how to achieve true superiority;⁶ but they are not seen elevating themselves inappropriately; this fault still belongs to all those who have been recently exalted by political events; their table never offered more than a clumsy and grotesque largesse, concealing poorly their frugal and commonplace customs.

Within the higher rank of trade, banking, and among the winners on the stock exchange, there was greater taste and discernment; but all the conditions for elegance, urbanity, and wit were not entirely fulfilled; there is, even upon those tables most worthy of it, a brand new luxury displayed by those not at all accustomed to it. However, it still needs to be recognized

that, in this respect, the newest opulence made an honest effort; but we persist in thinking that the bankers and brokers acted too much like little princes, in such a way that they were far removed from the great nobles.

The highest commercial rank had instincts more certain and straightforward; in its constructions, its little palaces, its houses in town and country, it was quite simply enveloped in an enormous luxury and the most sumptuous abundance. Often, in the depths of the provinces, it displayed a pomp that astonished even Paris.

You generally dine well enough among the professions, at the homes of those doctors and attorneys who, as a result of their influence and the presumption of their worth and expertise, are placed so close to the leading lights of society they are sometimes mistaken for them; at some you even dine wisely, but with a gravity that takes things seriously, priding itself neither on its frivolity nor its capricious fantasy: the sweet tooth is not always satisfied there, but the stomach is content. These dinners usually have certain practices, in which the conveyance of commissions and clientele play a role.

Lawyers generally have livelier styles; even at the homes of the oldest ones, especially in regard to revelry at the table, there is something of the clerk; their fine dining is, generally speaking, young and sensual, but only on good days: their ordinary fare is almost always detestable.

In Paris there is a kind of succulent dinner almost beyond reproach: these are the ones given by single men of leisure, persons withdrawn from the world and comfortably placed, who quietly pass the better part of their lives in an exchange of genteel gourmandizing. These meals are called bachelor dinners. They are usually put together with infinite art and their execution is overseen with loving care. At these tables a perfect decorum is the only luxury, which, in fact, does much for the sheer joy of those present; the excellent quality of all the dishes and of all the preparations is the host's pride. These dinners have two distinct complexes: the one, engaged, almost studious, frugal in speech, and attesting to its happiness through an expressive pantomime, rigorously tied to the rules, and taking a serious pleasure from the joys of the table; the other, animated and joyful, little concerned about etiquette, downright boisterous, eating and drinking to excess, with radiant features and an open and shining gaze.

Youth and women do not like being in such company; mature years and a vigorous old age find considerable delight there. It's not unusual to see these friendly meals favor one or two choice morsels: a fine fish, a marvel of a chicken or an extraordinary roast of game, a renowned or ideal pheasant or

fish stew, or some celebrated spring vegetable bearing the cost of a dinner where all the honor belongs to them. Married men, out on a fling and far from the conjugal *pot-au-feu*,⁷ also love and cultivate fine fare. These tables have a motto that sums up their tendencies and preferences exactly: “Let’s go slow and easy, and eat everything.”

We have never been fooled by what has been said about the tables of famous artists. Talma and Mlle. Mars had dinners that were praised without conviction, but the price attached to being admitted into the company of these famous people was the best seasoning for a meal of which wonders were told.⁸ Mlle. Mars always had a well-appointed table, but without any real distinction; at her place reigned a certain conventional spirit that smacked far more of the clique than of the world; words were used there that were immediately put into circulation. A detestable habit! Regular guests reigned in these houses; with manner and look they tyrannized newcomers, whose presence seemed to disturb them. During the last years she spent in the theater, Mlle. Mars surrounded herself with girls and young women; once retired from the scene, she continued with these preferences, giving to her dinners the air of a boarding-school tea and to her salon the look of the school’s visiting room. The age of Mlle. Mars, like that of Mme. Maintenon, turned it into a St. Cyr.⁹ Several reputations for wit emerged from the table and the venerable salon of Mlle. Mars.

Mlle. Contat gave her name to a soup; formerly, the great nobles were fond of such baptisms.¹⁰ At Talma’s we will have said everything about its master, his table, and the company when we write these few words: “Good times were had by all there.”

Mlle. Duchesnois prepared and offered fine fare; she was ruined by it.¹¹ Mlle. Bourgoing was kindness personified; her house was open to all-comers, welcomed by her smile, her beauty, and that grace that was hers alone.¹² A good deal of pleasure was to be had there, perhaps too much for the sake of taste and wit. Mlle. Bourgoing received persons of considerable substance, Marshals of France: it was at her place that the Spanish loan was concluded. At the dinner she gave to celebrate this occasion, she found beneath her napkin 100,000 francs presented to her by M. Torreno.¹³

At that time, a cordial and fraternal linkage existed among all the great intellects: writers, painters, musicians, artists, and actors — all who were involved in the work of mind and spirit, from near or far, those who were attached to the arts, to literature, or to the theater by their taste, their cooperative nature, their affections, their relations, and by their goodwill — were affiliated with the intellectual family. They gathered everywhere, and dinners multiplied where each brought



FIGURE 4: “In the winter, in the city, crêpes are made or chestnuts are eaten . . .”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

along a spirit devoid of envy but ready for those battles given such a sharp rivalry by self-esteem.

Critics of some substance had their tables set almost everywhere, especially at the homes of the theater’s illustrious subjects; this was the time when men who were sought out for the appeal of their conversation were like Fontenelle, who never dined at his own table.¹⁴

At the Opera, you dined only at the homes of Mme. Branchu and Mme. Clotilde: song and dance welcomed their friends for supper.¹⁵

Today, the kings and queens, the princes and princesses of the theater sometimes give a surprising dinner, a splendid ball, occasionally, with a meal at night, or even an occasional concert bursting with camaraderie. But when the actresses have, in one evening, dissolved Cleopatra’s pearl,¹⁶ when the actors have spent in one night half the receipts from a benefit performance, that says it all: it is a debt paid off once a year; you go to their homes out of curiosity. Between the theater and the world there is nothing else in common; stage knows nothing else of the world; the world understands nothing else of the theater.

Mlle. Rachel has a mansion in Paris and a pavilion in Marly:¹⁷ in the winter, in the city, crêpes are made or chestnuts are eaten, and you drink cider; in the summer, in the country, fruit from the garden is eaten, and you drink beer. On the quai Voltaire, lotto¹⁸ is played in the sitting room; at Marly, hide-and-seek is played. The joys and pleasures of children that, later, seem ridiculous.

In general, actors and artists, by their very position, are delivered over to a kind of female steward who almost always replaces the master's intentions with her own narrow interests; also, in these dwellings, a certain discomfort caused by disorder can be seen peeking out from behind the luxury: there is abundance and distress.

There is nothing finer nor more delicate than the table of the well-off Parisian bourgeoisie; we do not hesitate to assert that a certain degree of perfection is found in this middle range. The sparseness of its service was once thought worthy of reproach; and the gluttony of some provinces was very much amused by what it called the small dishes of Paris. But despite these admonitions, it is still necessary to look for the true nature and real charms of Parisian dinners among the affluent bourgeoisie.

The dinners we are talking about are those that houses, which are enjoying good fortune and experiencing a certain degree of expansion in business and interests, give once a week for guests who, in number, should never be less than five nor more than twelve. Ordinarily, these meals are prepared by a woman cook. Those who assume some disdain for the feminine kind in matters of cooking are unaware of the superior levels these women have attained through their merits, to which tradition still assigns the name of "blue ribbon." It is impossible to bring greater care, greater delicacy, greater taste, and greater intelligence than they apply to the choice and preparation of dishes. A good Parisian cook who has been allowed real freedom of action is a person whose talent can contend with that of the celebrated chefs, with the exception only of the fashioning of a table's great centerpieces and grand dessert confections; but in the matter of refined delicacies and morsels prepared with scrupulous care, a good cook yields to no one. Place beside her a lady of the house who manages without badgering her, who guides and enlightens without tormenting her, and from that happy alliance, you will see emerge those exquisite meals whose memory is never lost once they have been experienced.

No luxury, nothing exorbitant is seen at the bourgeois tables; but the decorum there is extreme. The serving implements do not exhibit, as elsewhere, the latest styles; perhaps even the form of these objects has been outdated, but everything there has an accommodating air. On these tables, it seems, the mark of a stable fortune can be found; the extent of the family's luxury is reflected in the very date of the dishware's length of service. This affluence, which has not arrived overnight, is appreciated, and that modesty of the old hearth pleases just as, in other places, the opulence of the real aristocracy surprises and seduces. At these dinners, the dishes are not numerous, are in no way abundant; but



FIGURE 5: "Those who assume some disdain for the feminine kind in matters of cooking are unaware of the superior levels these women have attained..."

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

the excellence of the quality makes what they might lack in quantity easy to forget. One of the merits of these meals is the kindly and attentive courtesy that presides over their direction. The guests are not abandoned to the serving staff; the lord and lady of the manor, their closest friends and relatives are united in a common concern that reaches out to all desires, anticipates every wish, and is never intrusive. These happy meals are quite often enlivened by the openness of the talk; perfect wines, which are a credit to the better houses, support the gaiety of a conversation less noisy, without doubt, than the deafening discussions of more pretentious tables. But the wit there is gentle, easily accessible; it doesn't stifle the dinner, it adorns it, embellishes it, and leaves a little room for other pleasures besides that of being heard.

The length of these dinners is carefully calculated: you should not be at the table for less than two hours, you should not spend more than three hours there. The best guideline to follow is never to hurry or accelerate anything, and especially to make sure that, without any rush, the guest is always occupied: that is the height of good taste and true courtesy.

How very much we prefer these dinners, these celebrations of the Parisian bourgeoisie, to those great meals, sparkling with splendor! How much we place them especially above those brawling mob scenes that substitute fatigue for pleasure, and those dinners structured and stiffened by etiquette and the chilly demands of the ceremonial.



FIGURE 6: “They sensibly renounced those improvised preparations that know how to enhance dishes . . . only by scorching the palate.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

We have one particular compliment to direct to the diners of the Parisian bourgeoisie; they have shaken off the yoke of culinary routine: they have sensibly removed from their tables some of those dishes eagerly sought after in the past. Of this type we know of no more resounding and deserved fall than that of the *fricandeu*,¹⁹ formerly so honored and now found no more except among suburban cook-caterers and on a few tables in the Marais.²⁰

In Paris the true bourgeois dinners were exempt from the passion for progress and the fury with which, in the higher regions, foreign habits were vigorously pursued. They have embraced cuts of meat and fish, roasted and boiled in the English manner; but they sensibly renounced those improvised preparations that know how to enhance dishes without taste only by scorching the palate. The bourgeois dinner did not allow its table to be invaded by the monstrous puddings that so ineptly stuff French stomachs; but they diminished the abuse of sauces, various in the extreme, and that chemistry of spices that for so long made French cuisine a danger to health. It's not impossible that we have just expressed a series of gastronomic blasphemies, but we are sure we have on our side the sense, spirit, and taste of right-thinking people.

Before going into the common generalities about the Parisian dinner, and after having said what we know about the best, we ought to say what we know about the worst.

This is the dinner of the upstart social climber. In Paris, it's one of those tables given a reputation by parasites, one that, furthermore, has never transcended the boundaries of a space absolutely foreign to the rest of the world.

The art of giving a dinner cannot be learned while residing at the cook-caterers or in the cabarets, as our Young Turks thought. Allow a man, suddenly favored by good fortune, to think about setting a table, and you will glimpse in

his receptions those impudent and grotesque absurdities that encumber the entire person of a moneyed lout. You will see at once that he very seriously believes he has the right to entrust the happiness of those he has invited to his lackeys. At first sight, his table will resemble a silversmith's shop; and within that confused mass of objects, of utensils, and of vases and vessels of every type, where nothing reveals its function, you are embarrassed, flustered, and without guidance. Do not ask the lord of the manor the purpose of all these things he has piled up, and in such a way that one cannot be touched without upsetting everything else; he personally knows nothing about it; it has all been sent to him like trinkets for the natives. Dinner is more of the same; it comes from the most famous caterer, but it arrives cold, in no particular order; those serving it barely understand how to serve the general public. They come on time, rush the guests, hurry the service, get everything out-of-order, and thereby manage to combine all the drawbacks of a restaurant without any of the privileges that, in such places, can redeem everything.

To know if the dinner he gives is good or bad, the upstart has only one standard, the price the meal will cost him. This man has never even thought about anything that could increase his guests' pleasure through the civility of their mutual interactions; he's not giving you a dinner for you, he's giving you a dinner for himself. Other than that he has relegated your happiness to his servants, he remembers nothing more about you.

The only attention he sometimes shows is to ask you bluntly if you are satisfied. He is used to being paid with a thankful tribute by the core of those he feeds, as they leave the table.

What this sort of person overlooks the most is that the dinner is not ended with the last mouthful eaten and the last swallow of a drink; beyond the dining room there are considerations and a thousand delicate touches of immeasurable charm, delectable details that complete the pleasure. The higher precincts do not have the leisure to think about that. A gala dinner abandons its guests upon departure from the table; a fine dinner accompanies them in all the small joys that, after dessert, follow in their footsteps. As for the upstart, he lets his people put out the candles, his guests search for their hats, and he runs to digest his meal publicly in his box at the Opera, to let everyone know he has dined copiously; neither his face, nor the tone of his voice, nor his mannerisms leave any doubt of that.

There is no lack of persons to repeat in all places that this table is one of the finest in Paris, and the upstart takes them at their word, without suspecting the cruel and savage irony in



FIGURE 7: “He runs to digest his meal publicly in his box at the Opera, to let everyone know he has dined copiously.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

such praise. He doesn’t hear these lines from *The Misanthrope*, muttered under one’s breath on rising from the table:

He is, in my book, quite a nasty dish, this lout,
Which spoils every dinner given in his house. (Act II, v)

Not all the tables of the Parisian bourgeoisie have the same merits; we need to go step by step from the delights we have just described down to the mediocre, almost down to the poverty-stricken. No populace is more inventive about the pleasures, resources, and the necessities of domestic life than that of Paris. From the affluent bourgeoisie, whose existence borders on the opulent and the aristocratic, follow the more modest classes, and we arrive at the office clerks, and those living off of small incomes and mediocre pensions, off of uncertainty and the most meager of profits. And still, at every level, to the degree that well-being diminishes, you see the care, the solicitude, the effort, and the intelligence increase; the slightest dish is prepared with an infinite art. The aroma of a certain lamb stew has made the wealthy man, who has just passed in front of the porter’s shed on his way to eat a truffled turkey, quiver with delight and desire; it should also be said that no other city offers more resources to the smaller fortunes and to the discretion of those who wish to hide their thriftiness from sight, than Paris. The number of these small dinners, composed sometimes of a single dish, makes up the majority of the modest meals homemakers prepare with as much zeal as if it were the finest cuisine. In such a diet diminished like this, there is nothing neglected, nothing shoddy. When not intemperate, the Parisian is strangely sober; women especially live off of little.

Rich or poor, in easy or difficult circumstances, the Parisian has one compulsion we do not have the boldness to fault: he is mad about hospitality.



FIGURE 8: “The number of these small dinners . . . makes up the majority of the modest meals homemakers prepare with as much zeal as if it were the finest cuisine.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

“What day are you going to have dinner with us?” “When can you come over?” “Your place is always set.” “Come and share a meal with us.”

All of these expressions are, for him, a part of common civility, and they are not always empty phrases. When the Parisian entertains or receives, he wants to gain a certain amount of credit from those he has invited. For that he spares nothing, he knows how to conceal his adversity: and it is not rare when vanity or self-interest is at stake for an embarrassed household to roll out a luxury purchased on credit, bringing along with it, as a consequence, extended grief: but for a couple of hours, a veil has been thrown over a poverty that modern manners have made almost into a crime, and for the moment that is good enough. To give a dinner sufficient to establish a reputation for opulence, there are houses willing to fast for entire months, and, for one day of luxury, endure long and oppressive deprivations. These foibles, that breed vanity on high, reach the lower regions only in rare and weakened forms. A woman, about to leave for the ball, brilliant in diamonds and lace, dines with her maid; namely, by dunking, in turns, a sliver of bread into a soft-boiled egg.

The merchant’s dinner is never an object of particular concern. Industry, business, trade, whatever they are doing,



FIGURE 9: "If the secret of this shameful stinginess were known, the excessive appetites of these young ladies when they were dining out . . . would be less surprising."

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).



FIGURE 10: "Never enter a barbershop at the dinner hour; the help, upset about leaving the table, will take out their displeasure on your head or chin."

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

they dine only on the run. Stores of some significance do not look down on good everyday fare; but they do not have the leisure or the necessary peace of mind to enjoy these resources. The meals at the major establishments where the clerks are fed are almost always outrageously simple; there are few exceptions to this rule. These dinners take after the dietary programs of schools and boardinghouses. Within these industrial communities, women are still more poorly treated than men. The houses that look after their workers are few in number, and there is one particular establishment, whose magnificent exterior startles the passerby, that allows the young women who labor in its workshops literally to die of hunger. If the secret of this shameful stinginess were known, the excessive appetites of these young ladies when they were dining out on the town would be less surprising.

As for the shop, everything is done at once and in haste; at dinnertime the bourgeois wife and her maid go to the nearest market and hastily buy whatever food can be cooked in a few minutes. So, some dinner! A morsel cut into without any certainty it will ever be finished: eye and ear on the watch, ready to get up and leave at a moment's notice, that's how the Parisian merchant dines. There are grocery clerks pestered incessantly by the mischief of the Parisian urchins; these unfortunates cannot lift a fork without a buyer coming to rouse them up, and it's always about a penny purchase. Never enter a barbershop at the dinner hour; the help, upset about

leaving the table, will take out their displeasure on your head or chin.

The worker who has his own household and eats his own cooking, dines quickly, sometimes on what is brought to him from home, sometimes on what he has carried with him that morning. Evening is his time for a meal at his own place; we will come back to him and his family for that moment.

The most basic item of the Parisian dinner is the *pot-au-feu*. In most of France, the convention of soup and beef is a national tradition.

In traveling through these different regions, in visiting and searching through instances so diverse, we see popular customs altering in a thousand ways; under observation, these varieties seem to be growing in number.

An entire class of laborers dines out in the open; they can be found on the quays, on the bridges, in the squares, and on the streets, near buildings under construction. The workers who adopt this sort of life are generally the most frugal; they eat while walking, in groups, sitting down or reclining like the Neapolitan *lazzarone*,²¹ the cooked and cured meats still sizzling, having been lifted right off the pan of the peddler, whose counter is a dripping-tray: these portable, walking kitchens are common only in Paris. The women who practice this trade are the worker's salvation, and quite often when he is in search of work, or sitting on his hands from lack of a job, he is fed by a dinner where the security for its price is the prospect of better days.



FIGURE 11: “These portable, walking kitchens are common only in Paris.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).



FIGURE 12: “He carries his dinner in his pocket: a small roll that he crumbles, swallowing each mouthful on the sly.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

And let’s not forget that young man whose elegance is beginning to look a little threadbare; he carries his dinner in his pocket: a small roll that he crumbles, swallowing each mouthful on the sly, with a turn of the head.

Given such matters, Sunday joys and the excesses of the seventh day should be viewed without surprise; for the entire laboring populace, burdened by work for six days, and on whom such harsh privations are imposed, a few hours of free pleasures are a gift from heaven. Again, upon consideration of that situation in which the mass of workers are placed, less severity should be shown for the excesses of their recreations.



FIGURE 13: “The number of guests . . . is, of itself, a subject for grave concern and dispute.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

There are, for dinner, some general principles, and among others, we will readily recall those directed far more to the spirit than to the stomach.

The right choice of and the balance among the assembled guests are some of the most important conditions of a fine dinner; it is here especially that this quality of taste, which seems in itself to encompass all others, ought to be noticed; and it is called “tact.”

“A man who knows how to live eats and drinks little at his own table.”²²

“A fine innovation, an intelligent adaptation of current customs to our revised ideas, almost always enchants. Real elegance is innovation under restraint, a transition well arranged. Its secret is in these words: ‘Enough: never too much.’”

In Paris the bourgeois dinner has its absurdities, its tribulations, and its difficulties. The number of guests — that need to be balanced with requirements for interaction, the size of the apartment, and household resources — is, of itself, a subject for grave concern and dispute. Matters of precedence and personal consideration, of self-esteem and incompatible temperaments are neither less extensive nor less grueling. The more trifling the social position, the more relentless and arrogant are the pretensions.

Here’s a lady of the house we recommend to all women, a type who can also be studied by more than one man with profit.

Mme. De Fontanes had such a reliable sense of tact her husband never had any need to reveal to her the degree of favor, familiarity, or frigidity she ought to use regarding one or the other of their guests.²³ Always well-versed on the latest appointments and university-faculty promotions, thoroughly knowledgeable about the merits of the foreign scholars visiting Paris, taking care to be well-informed about the literary



FIGURE 14: “She knew . . . to whom she could not avoid offering her hand during the passage from sitting- to dining-room.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

successes of the day, she knew which man ought to be the evening’s guest-of-honor, to whom she could not avoid offering her hand during the passage from sitting- to dining-room, those also who ought to be placed to her right or her left, and, finally, those she could, without wounding, relegate to the ends of the table. Such finely skilled attentions from the mistresses of the great houses are possessed by few of today’s great ladies in any higher degree; yet it is still one of the powerful paths to success in the administrative and political realms.

Mme. de D . . . won more friends for M. Talleyrand than all the wounded vanities his sharp wit had chased away.²⁴ To welcome and treat people according to their recognized merit or the success they have just obtained; to avoid irritating by clear preferences in the wake of rival self-esteem; to prompt, for some, the tale of the previous night and, for others, the anecdote of the day in order to make those who tell the best stories shine; to lead deftly into the fray the man who has only some knowledge of a field of study; to force a serious conversation to turn toward the arts, enabling an artist, up to then silent and neglected, to make a case for his specialty; and with all that, ensuring, while at the table, that the choicest morsels are circulated, and upon return to the sitting room, the most gracious words: that is a very precious talent and one almost lost in the hurly-burly of our banquets.

The Boileau satire on his anger over a bad dinner²⁵ is gentle, benign, and indulgent if compared to the cruelty of the sarcasms that nowadays hound a disagreeable and

displeasing dinner. For this malfeasance, for this crime of lèse-hospitality, the world has no pity.

Several examples of these entertaining outbursts could be cited. We’ll report the most ludicrous ones.²⁶

It was at the home of a woman who was very distinguished and usually very good company, but unaware of Parisian gastronomy’s thousand affectations. It was in June; the water in the carafes was not iced. “Ah, warm water!” cried out one of the guests. “François, go find me some ice; I’m sorry to say, tepid water makes me sick, I could not eat dinner.” The lady of the house was embarrassed. A moment later another guest cried out, “Oof, some fish! If the water’s not fresh, the fish is no longer fresh, they’re in tune together.” “Oh, look, it’s Bilboquet’s carp you’re serving us here,” another comic voice replied in turn. “Passing by the market, I saw a superb carp; two weeks from now, I’ll haggle for it.” (See Odry et *Les Saltimbanques*.)²⁷

This sharp reference was greeted with merciless outbursts of laughter; the lady of the house could hardly breathe. Champagne was served. “Ah, this,” said an old bon-vivant to the lord of the manor. “Aren’t you the one, my friend, who makes his own champagne himself? It’s not bad, but it lacks a little something to be excellent. Perhaps a touch more of tarragon.”

The outbursts of laughter intensified: the lady of the house turned red with shame, her husband purple with anger; but they kept their composure. The water-cure, the boot, the rack, the wheel are tortures that had been abolished; these torments were nothing compared to those endured by these martyred hosts; and so it was for the entire length of the dinner, witticisms for every wine, epigrams for every dish. At last, all rose from the table; and a final word put a proper end to that sad celebration: “Ah, I’m so hungry! I’m so hungry!” cried one of the guests loud and clear upon leaving the dining room. “Sirs, I’m inviting you all to sup with me tonight at Café Anglais!”

To soothe the reader’s indignation, we will talk about one of the characteristics that does most honor to the venerable tradition of French courtesy.

In England, at the time of the French Revolution, the Duke of Bedford offered the émigré duc de Grammont a splendid meal, one of those quasi-royal celebrations that the great English lords give to heads of state to display their pride and offer to exiles to show their good taste.²⁸ At dessert a certain bottle of Constantia²⁹ was produced, a marvelous wine, peerless, ageless, priceless. It was liquid gold inside sacred crystal; a molten treasure that was a privilege to taste, a beam of sunlight sent down into your glass: it was the ultimate nectar, Bacchus’s final word. The Duke of Bedford wished personally to pour this divine liquor for his guest. The duc de Grammont took the glass, tasted the alleged wine, and



FIGURE 15: “A young and very pretty woman approached him, rolling an enormous piece of sugar about her fingers.”

IMAGE FROM BRIFFAULT, *PARIS À TABLE* (1846).

pronounced it excellent. Bedford, to match him, wanted to drink to his health in turn; but he had hardly brought the glass to his lips when he cried out in horrid disgust: “Ah, what in heaven’s name is this?” He was quickly surrounded, the bottle examined, the aroma investigated: it was castor oil. Grammont had swallowed that detestable medicine without raising an eyebrow. This sublime characteristic greatly honored the nobility of France; where courtesy approaches heroism, a lofty notion of a country can be imagined.

The sensitivities of the petite bourgeoisie can be great fun; they are extreme, although those of the aristocracy yield nothing to them; they are as haughty as those of the other are petty.

At the home of a rich banker, a man known for his urbanity was taking some coffee after dinner: at the very moment he was about to savor this delicious brew, a young and very pretty woman approached him, rolling an enormous piece of sugar about her fingers. “Sir,” she said to him with the most gracious of smiles, “would you allow me to dunk my sugar?”

This odd familiarity disconcerted him to such a degree that he turned pale, trembled, and dumped the contents of his cup over the white dress of the sugar lady.

A German countess poured some tea; a German baron, instead of using tongs, took some sugar with his fingers. The countess marched over to the window, opened it, and tossed out the sugar bowl; the baron quietly finished drinking his tea; when he was done, he also went over to the window, opened it, and threw out his empty cup. Two months after this scene, the baron married the countess.

We have made the particular features of the Parisian diner’s character and several of its singular practices the object of particular study.

It is perhaps within the postscript where the thinking behind everything that comes before needs to be found.

We end with an aphorism: “The disposition of a dinner must be like the machines behind the Opera, where the effect charms and the strings are never seen.”³⁰ 



NOTES

1. See, for instance, Allen S. Weiss’s introduction to the abridged *Mercure de France* edition (Briffault 2003: 7).
2. A similar introduction prefaced my translation of the chapter “The Restaurants of Paris,” which was published in the Spring 2014 issue of *Gastronomica* (14, no. 1: 33–43). I would like to take this opportunity to correct a few mistakes that appeared in that article. The name of the historian Rebecca L. Spang was misspelled in both footnotes and bibliography. The proper citation is “Spang, Rebecca L. 2000. *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.” In addition, on p. 37 the word “glaces” was translated as “ices”; the proper translation in this context would be “reductions.”
3. The reference here is to the First Empire under Napoleon, which lasted from 1804 to 1814, to be replaced by the Restoration under the Bourbon kings Louis XVIII and Charles X. Except for the hundred days preceding Waterloo, the Restoration lasted from 1814 to the July Revolution of 1830 and the installation of Louis-Philippe I as “King of the French” (until he was overthrown in 1848).
4. In 1825 a law was passed to raise over one billion francs to compensate needy émigrés (whose property had been confiscated during the French Revolution), to be funded by the conversion of interest rates for government bonds from 5% to 3%, an action leading to a great deal of uncertainty and financial speculation.
5. Article 405 of the penal code of 1810 outlaws fraudulent practices leading to “belief of false speculation or of imaginary means of credit.”
6. These three families date back to the tenth or eleventh centuries. Members of the Noailles and Montmorency families served as ambassadors during the Restoration. Also during the Restoration two of the La Trémoille brothers (spelled Trémouille by Briffault) served as lieutenant-généraux (an honorific representative of royalty).
7. *Pot-au-feu* usually consists of a piece of beef poached with vegetables and served separately from the broth in which it is cooked. It comes as close as any other preparation to being a French national dish, at least for the lower and middle classes. It is the first dish mentioned by Brillat-Savarin in his *Physiologie du goût* (1825) and by Antonin Carême in his *L’art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle* (1833), and later in this chapter Briffault calls it “the most basic

item of the Parisian dinner,” declaring that “in most of France, the convention of soup and beef is a national tradition.”

8. François-Joseph Talma, a friend of revolutionaries and Napoleon Bonaparte, was one of the most renowned actors during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Mlle. Mars, Anne Françoise Hyppolyte Boutet Salvétat, Talma’s contemporary, was a primary interpreter of Molière and Beaumarchais during a long and celebrated acting career.

9. A boarding school for the daughters of impoverished nobility was founded in St. Cyr by Louis XIV in 1685, under the patronage of his second wife, Mme. de Maintenon.

10. “The most frequently cited soup . . . [is] that of Louise Contat, one of the most brilliant actresses to honor the French scene” ([Fayot] 1837, IX: 581).

11. Catherine Josephine Duchesnois was active at the Comédie française from 1810 to 1829.

12. The actress Marie-Thérèse Bourgoin (spelled Bourgoing by Briffault) was reputed to be the lover of, among others, Napoleon Bonaparte and Tsar Alexander I.

13. José María Queipo de Llano, Seventh Count of Tereno (spelled Terreno by Briffault) was in and out of power frequently in Spain, and he occasionally took up residence-in-exile in Paris where he died in 1843. Since during the 1820s he was also thought to be Mlle. Bourgoin’s lover, it is likely that the 100,000 francs mentioned above was for something other than assistance with the many loans Spain was arranging at the time (see Martínez et al. 2010: 47).

14. Bernard Le Bouvier de Fontenelle was an Enlightenment scientist, man-of-letters, and gourmand who attributed his long life to the consumption of strawberries.

15. Alexandrine-Caroline Branchu was the leading soprano at the Paris Opera in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and was reputed to be Napoleon Bonaparte’s mistress for a short time. Clotilde is likely Clotilde Farcy, who is referred to in reviews of the time and histories of the ballet (see, for instance, Chazin-Bennabum 2005).

16. The story of Cleopatra dissolving a pearl in a beaker of vinegar as a display of her extravagance and arrogance can be found in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (IX).

17. Rachel was the stage name for Elizabeth-Rachel Félix, perhaps the supreme tragedienne of Briffault’s time. She was also the mistress of Napoleon’s son, Count Walewski, and she gave birth to his son at Marly-le-roi in 1844.

18. Lotto is a board game similar to bingo.

19. In Alexandre Dumas’s *Grand dictionnaire de cuisine*, after describing *fricandeau* as “a larded and glazed filet or slice of veal,” he quotes Beaumarchais: “In restaurants that are new,/all your dishes are ideal,/and yet those fricandeaux/are always the same meal” (Dumas 1873: 571–72).

20. By the mid-nineteenth century the Marais had been largely abandoned by the moneyed classes, becoming a district of large homes converted to tenements, apartments, and ateliers.

21. Italian for “rascal” or “idler.”

22. This citation is taken from a piece, “Dîner,” written by Frédéric Fayot for *Encyclopédie des gens du monde* (VIII, 233) and reprinted in *Les Classiques de la table* (1843). Several observations in *Paris à table* are drawn from this piece.

23. Chantal Cathelin de Fontanes was the wife of the poet and man-of-letters Louis de Fontanes, who held several high positions in French educational institutions in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

24. Married to Talleyrand’s nephew, Dorothea von Biron, also known as the Duchess de Dino, was the French statesman’s companion for several years and rumored to be his mistress. “Quelle femme que Mme. de Dino!” exclaimed Rodolphe Apponyi in 1829 in praise of her merits (Apponyi 1913: 156).

25. “Le repas ridicule” (1665), the Third Satire of Nicolas Boileau, perhaps the most celebrated satirist of his time, relates the tale of a “ridiculous meal” given by a man of both extravagant and bad taste.

26. The following four anecdotes are indeed “cited,” having been drawn directly, often in the same language, from letter XVIII of December 7, 1840, written under the pseudonym of Vicomte Charles de Lannay by Delphine de Girardin for the series “Courrier de Paris,” published in her husband’s newspaper *La Presse* from 1831–48, and later collected in several editions including Girardin’s complete works (see de Lannay 1857, III: 134–37).

27. *Les Saltimbanques* by Théophile Marion Dumersan and Charles Voirin was produced with some success at the Théâtre des Variétés in 1838. In the play, the popular comic actor Jacques Odry was celebrated for his portrayal of Bilboquet who speaks in Act II, scene iii, a line similar to the one referred to here.

28. The Duke referred to here is probably Francis Russell, the fifth Duke of Bedford, and Grammont is probably the eighth duke, Antoine Louis Marie de Grammont, who emigrated during the Revolution.

29. Constantia is a South African dessert wine that was a favorite of nineteenth-century European royalty. Napoleon had thirty bottles a month shipped to Elba for solace during his confinement.

30. This quote is very similar to one attributed to Suzanne Curchod, the wife of the Swiss financier Jacques Necker and hostess of one of the ancien régime’s most brilliant salons, although her reference is to “The disposition (*l’ordre*) of the house (*maison*) . . .” rather than to the “dîner” (Necker 1798, I: 241).

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