

What Shall We Have Today? Culinary Adaptation in World War I Paris

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During the First World War, many foods vanished from the markets and shops of Paris. Disruptions along rail lines meant that food shipments from the provinces were often delayed. The continually rising cost of food was a significant hardship. This study of wartime cookbooks examines the kinds of practical knowledge food writers offered Frenchwomen to enable them to shift to a war footing and guide them as they shopped and cooked under these extraordinary conditions. I end the paper with a look at how wartime cooking trends influenced French cuisine in the post-war decade.

The cookbooks I discuss in the paper represent two social movements in pre-war France that influenced food writers as they sought formulas to help women adapt to the new wartime urban foodscape. The first was the domestic science movement, which taught women a new culinary vocabulary – e.g., proteins, calories, vitamins, *équivalences alimentaires* (food equivalencies) – so that they might optimize the nutritional value of family meals. Provisioning difficulties played havoc with life-long habits of shopping and cooking. The need to economize on food and fuel and maximize nutrition turned what may have been an easy, even pleasurable daily ritual into an ordeal requiring a great deal of thought, planning, and time. Wartime cookbooks were guides to help women change habitual behaviours into mindful actions in order to save the health and wealth of their families during this time of great insecurity.

Second, wartime culinary literature shows that food writers turned to the old formulas of traditional French home cooking, and in particular regional cuisine, to cope with food shortages, unpredictable arrivals of fresh foods in the urban markets, and high prices. As a result of continued economic disruptions in the post-war years, the characteristics of regional cooking, particularly flexibility and frugality, made this the most pronounced and normative trend in French food culture between the two world wars.

Wartime inflation afflicted all but the wealthiest Parisians. Working-class consumers felt the pinch in their purses before the war due to the rising cost of popular high-status foods, such as butcher's meat (beef, veal, mutton, and lamb), that had become more commonplace in their diets (Feilbogen 1913, p.727). The high cost of living was called 'la vie chère' (literally, the expensive life), and during the war this problem became more acute. Rising food prices were an unrelenting source of worry, a preoccupation for consumers as well as for the public authorities responsible for urban provisioning and public order (Maroussem 1911, 31). Thus, la vie chère was at the centre of the growing public anxiety over the structure and condition of French

urban provisioning (Clafin 2006). I suggest that food writers offered Parisian women new knowledge that equipped them to navigate this crisis and thus gave them a greater sense of control over their lives in the crucible of war.

The science of adaptation

The turn-of-the-century French domestic science movement taught home cooks to adopt a scientific approach to food and cooking. There was a new understanding that meals should always include the crucial elements of proper nutrition for good health. French domestic science still adhered to the timeless rules of French home cooking: dishes must taste delicious, and meals must offer variety. But the cook's language now expanded beyond *roux*, *bain-marie*, and *julienne* to include carbohydrates, proteins, and calories. August Moll-Weiss (1863–1946) was a feminist, a social reformer, and the founder of the household rationalization movement in France. Her two wartime books, *La Vie moins chère* (The Less-Expensive Life) (1917) and *L'Alimentation en temps de guerre* (Food in Wartime) (1919), allow us to examine the intersection of wartime restrictions and the domestic science movement. Moll-Weiss commiserated with her readers that the war had turned domestic life upside down (1917, p.5). Her goal with these books was to offer solutions and impart the skills women needed in order to properly feed and care for their families in the face of shortages and restrictions. She also took care to explain why making economies was critical not only to the survival of individuals and families, but also the nation.

La Vie moins chère begins with an explanation of why this particular moment calls for a new treatise on domestic economy. First, the state had recently begun to intervene in the consumer economy by imposing restrictions. And secondly, the war had entered its third year with no end in sight. Many women had taken jobs in war factories, and more than a few of them came from the servant class. Many middle-class women no longer had even one servant and had to do for themselves, often for the first time. No one had the luxury of spare time that they may have had before the war. The short war theory of autumn 1914 was well and truly dead, and it was evident that inflation and shortages would persist beyond the war's end.

By 1919, when *L'Alimentation en temps de guerre* appeared, the cost of living in Paris had increased by as much as 300 to 400 percent, depending on the source (Stovall 2012, pp.49–50). After the Ministry of Food was established in December 1916, food ministers changed

often and food policies more often than that. The press accused one food minister, Maurice Violette (March 1917-September 1917), of changing 'his decrees as if they were shirts.' *Le Journal* reported that 'decrees are succeeded by laws, which annul orders. Provisional regime, trial regime, definitive regime, in reality, regime of total incertitude' ('Pain blanc et jours sans viande,' 1917).

Moll-Weiss wrote that there were two kinds of restrictions: state-imposed 'official restrictions' (rationing), which affected products such as sugar, flour, meat, and coal; and, 'automatic restrictions,' which were the result of high prices for non-rationed foods, such as eggs, butter, and milk (1919, p.10). She explained that it was 'the duty of every citizen to extract the best of each foodstuff' – both flavor and nutrition – and to do this old habits must give way to 'scientific observations' about the manner in which foods are prepared (1919, p.12). She explained, in her trademark pedagogical manner, how to think about calories, nutrients, substitutions, and economizing without sacrificing nutrition or taste.

Food restrictions, in fact, did not come down to a simple dichotomy: too expensive or rationed. There were long lines at shops and markets, restrictions on the number of courses that restaurants could serve, forced food shop closings, and 'jours sans' (the days without meat or sweets), all before official rationing began. Some restrictions struck Moll-Weiss as plainly ridiculous, and she did not hesitate to point them out to her readers. For example, the food minister prohibited restaurants from putting butter on diners' tables, but still permitted it in cooking. Moll-Weiss tells us that butter ('the king of our national cuisine!') must be allowed on food for taste rather than being wasted as a cooking fat (1919, p.15). She includes a recipe for homemade margarine for cooking (1919, p.120), assuring her readers that making economies did not have to mean deprivation!

For both economy and good health, Moll-Weiss instructed readers to eat less meat. She called it 'Carême civique,' meaning secular or patriotic Lent (1919, p.29). (1) Scientists believed that the average person needed 100 grams of meat per day. Prewar consumption in Paris averaged 300 grams per day (higher than outside of the Paris region). In wartime soldiers, not civilians, must be assured of generous meat rations (Claflin 2014). Meat substitutes included chicken, fish, eggs, and cheeses, but these were everyone's substitutes, and they were in short supply as well (Claflin 2006). Labor shortages meant that rural women had to take care of the heavy farm work and could not attend to their traditional barnyard chores. As a result, poultry arrivals to Les Halles central market in December 1915 were down 25 to 30 percent from 1913 figures ('La Question de la Volaille,' 1915). In 1915, a rabbit cost what leg of lamb had just one year earlier ('La Vie Chère,' 1915). By 1918, the amount of game and fowl coming into Paris reached only one-third the prewar average (Moll-Weiss 1919, pp.41–42). Before the war, about 800,000 kilos of fish per day arrived in Les Halles. But in

1917, just when the state restricted meat sales on certain days of the week, fish arrivals dropped to a meager 84,000 kilos per day (p.49).

Moll-Weiss recommended serving rice with added butter and cheese, which she called a risotto, noting that it was rich in protein and a good meat substitute (Moll-Weiss 1917, p.27). Such a wartime risotto would probably have been a relatively pricey main dish as the cost of rice, an imported food, had gone from almost 29 francs per 200 lbs. in 1914 to 170 francs in 1918, but this was still less than the increase in meat prices (Ministère du Travail 1924). Moll-Weiss advises adding extra cheese to macaroni, although manufactured foods were hard to come by as well. She offered a recipe for *omelette de macaroni sans oeufs et au fromage* (macaroni omelet with cheese and without eggs), which she calls 'exquisite' (1919, p.44). Cheese added to pasta, cereals, and vegetables provided excellent nourishment when substituted for meat. However, the military requisitioning of cheese drove prices up throughout the war. Fruits and vegetables remained economical, even more so if you had a little plot of earth outside Paris for a family garden, which many working-class families did.

The regional turn

The wartime cookbook of Benjamin Renaudet (1852–?) exemplifies this era's preoccupation with looking to the history of French cuisine for formulas for economical cooking. In *La Cuisine française économique et hygiénique en temps de guerre* (Economical and Healthy French Cuisine in Wartime) (1915), Renaudet, like Moll-Weiss, aimed to educate consumers about how to shop and cook frugally without sacrificing the standards of good French cooking. His approach is based less on science than on nostalgia, even nationalism. Renaudet suggests cooks return to an earlier time when French society was less prosperous, i.e., before people had acquired what he called 'modern' urban tastes. He writes, 'We must renounce the expensive meats, luxury fish, and the exquisite dishes that make the reputation of the French table the world over' (Renaudet 1915, p.v). French home cooking in wartime, Renaudet proposed, should be a rediscovery of 'la cuisine de grand'mère,' or grandmother's cooking.

Renaudet instructed the home cook to familiarize herself with cuts of meat from the second, rather than the first category. That is to say, no more expensive roast or filet; rather, meals should feature kidneys, feet, tongue, head, or heart. For *ragoût* of mutton, the prewar shoulder was out; the less expensive cuts of the *collet* (neck) and *poitrine* (belly) were in (Renaudet 1915, p.66). So-called 'luxury' fish, such as turbot and sole were also out; skate, mackerel, fresh sardines, and fresh tuna were in (p.85). Mussels and *escargots* were affordable but cooking them in butter doubled the cost of the dish (p.102). The home cook had to forgo buying vegetables that are *primeurs* (expensive early vegetables). And it is hard for us to imagine that the

white *champignons de Paris* (what we call button mushrooms) were no longer affordable, so shoppers had to content themselves with *cèpes* and *giroles* (wild mushrooms) (p.109). Renaudet advises the wartime cook to learn how to prepare unusual things to best advantage, as well as to master savvy marketing skills to be able to judge the quality of foods herself. It was more important than ever to know when merchants were trying to pass off lesser quality foods at usurious prices. Renaudet's recipes are richly descriptive to help women develop their skills of discernment.

The advice and recipes in Renaudet's cookbook hint at how much bourgeois home cooking and eating habits had changed in France over the course of the nineteenth century. He counseled that families should again make a daily habit of having soup, which was filling, nourishing, and low-cost. And as food got more expensive, there would naturally be fewer leftovers available to create *hors-d'oeuvres*, which had come to take the place of old-fashioned *potage* (thick soup) on fashionable nineteenth-century tables. Home cooks must, he continues, return to the tradition of using up stale bread in soups (Renaudet 1915, pp.9–10). Pasta had taken the place of bread in nineteenth-century soups, but being a manufactured food, it was more expensive, if available at all. Since he thought many women were unlikely to have much experience with the older style of cooking, Renaudet does not neglect even basic instructions, such as how to dry and store leftover bread so that it would be good in soups.

Renaudet slashes the number of classic sauces for home use from more than eighty featured in one prewar cookbook to the most economical twenty. His sauces are, in fact, eighteenth and early-nineteenth century revivals. For example, wartime white sauce is not a cream sauce. Rather it was made like butter sauces in French cookbooks from the seventeenth through the early-nineteenth centuries (without the egg yolk liaison and cream). *Sauce ravigote* and *sauce Robert* are much like François Menon's recipes for sauces of the same name in his eighteenth-century bestseller, *La cuisinière bourgeoise* (The Middle-Class [Female] Cook) (1746). (2)

Renaudet underscores the 'Frenchness' of his wartime recipes, saying that it was not necessary to adopt foreign ideas in order to economize (1915, p.vi). Renaudet's *pot-au-feu* recipe is as meticulously written as any good *pot-au-feu* recipe, war or no war. For middle-class and working-class families alike, *pot-au-feu* was a cornerstone of French home cooking, prepared once a week in many households. The characteristic perfection of method for the most fundamental and even simple dishes signals to the reader that this is still authentic French cooking. Wine remains important in wartime sauces, but we are told that Burgundies, Bordeaux, and Madeira had become too costly. Instead, the cook should use ordinary table wine, extend the cooking time a bit, and add a teaspoon of sugar. Renaudet's seven-hour leg of lamb, which he calls 'traditional French cooking, somewhat forgotten,' can even

be made respectably with imported chilled or frozen meat, both of which were new food products in wartime Paris (1915, pp.79–80; Claffin 2018).

For both Renaudet and Moll-Weiss, adaptation to the wartime economy and the food supply crisis relied on a return to regional recipes, or grandmother's cooking. The anthropologist Jack Goody has argued that the appeal of *la cuisine de grand'mère* (in contrast to *haute cuisine*) is the flexibility of these recipes to adapt to ingredients a cook has on hand. Because such recipes were often unwritten and passed along orally, Goody writes, this cuisine gives the cook permission to improvise (2008, pp.78–90). Indeed, Moll-Weiss believed that women were not as closely tied to the male tradition of French culinary art. Women, therefore, could cope more easily with wartime restrictions because 'their ingenuity permitted them to create ... dishes' (1919, pp.9–10). Moll-Weiss insisted that flexibility was of paramount importance during this time of restrictions and need for greater economy: to know how to retain the normal taste, texture, and appearance of a dish without using the habitual ingredients, such as eggs. Moll-Weiss helped by supplying recipes for making flan and mayonnaise without using eggs (pp.42–43). (3)

Cooking methods, too, needed to change when less-expensive ingredients were substituted for more costly prewar favorites. Forget roasting, and leave boiling to the English, says Renaudet (perhaps somewhat nationalistically); braising was the most nourishing and economical cooking method, and thus the one most appropriate for the wartime table (1915, p.38). He explains that braises save on cooking fats, and they can still be made deliciously unctuous with the addition of a veal bone or calf's foot. However, many women entered the work force or began full-time war charity work after August 1914, and long-cooking dishes demanded the lost luxury of time. Renaudet notes that grilling is quick, and not only for certain small cuts of meat, which were expensive, but also for sausages and many kinds of fish.

Renaudet advises consumers on how they can compromise materially without surrendering cultural values surrounding food and meals. He insists that it is possible to avoid suffering from the changes that current events demanded, although when he was writing the war was barely a year old. Even though some traditional recipes still needed modification in wartime, we see in Renaudet's recipes that the most essential elements that make French cuisine *French* are still intact. In fact, Renaudet calls this cuisine of adaptation 'our modest bourgeois cuisine' (1915, p.50). Seasonings and condiments – aromatic herbs, garlic, butter, onions, shallots, scallions, mushrooms, meat essences, wine, vinegar – supply the same flavor profiles found in the great cookbooks of the nineteenth century. Eggs, regardless of price, were still important on the wartime table. He suggests women buy them in season when they are the least expensive, the spring and the fall, and preserve them in any one of a variety of time-tested methods. However, egg

prices were so high by 1917, they were hardly still considered a meat substitute (Combe 1917, pp.70–71).

Moll-Weiss was also mindful of the traditional French flavor profile. Nonetheless, she writes that modifying cooking habits meant reducing or eliminating some ordinary ingredients, for example those that have a role to ‘velouter’ (impart creaminess) dishes, ‘parfumer’ (impart flavor), and otherwise ‘give them their French “cachet”’, such as egg yolks and cream (1917, p.47). As a substitute for a flour and butter roux to thicken potages, Moll-Weiss, like Renaudet, recommends using stale bread (p.35). Making such economies transported the wartime cook back to the medieval kitchen where potages and sauces were regularly thickened with breadcrumbs. Given the high prices of food and cooking fuel, everything needed to be simplified and streamlined. Wartime meals could feature fewer hot dishes by substituting cheese or fruits. With the cost of combustibles increasing every year of the war, Moll-Weiss advised the cook to save potato peelings, which, when dried out, could be used to boost the cooking fire. She charmingly referred to these sorts of tricks as ‘*la poubelle enchantée*,’ or the enchanted garbage can (p.39).

The economies of tradition

The war ended in 1918, and price controls were removed in 1919, but the effects of war lasted far longer. Already-high prices for food and combustibles jumped significantly higher before leveling off in the early 1920s (Ministère du Travail 1924). Wartime cookbooks would have still been useful to the postwar cook, and many new cookbooks published in the 1920s reflected the same trends. In the decade after the war, bourgeois cooking was synonymous with ‘la bonne cuisine familiale [...] *la vraie cuisine*’ (good family cooking ... *real cooking*). These phrases are interchangeable with regional cooking. This was not the cooking of grand restaurants, nor should it aspire to be, said food writers. ‘The good (female) cook is content to add the perfect seasonings, then she lovingly oversees the cooking. This is the whole secret to good cooking’ (Une Réunion de Professionnels 1927, p.6). French home cooking would be refined, of course, but economical as well.

A new edition of the bestselling nineteenth-century classic Audot’s *La Cuisinière de la campagne et de la ville* (The City and Country [Female] Cook) was published in 1928. The title page professes that this edition was ‘completely reviewed and simplified.’ The new preface affirms that ‘economic conditions were profoundly modified by the war, and meals, while remaining delicious, must be made with greater simplicity’ (Audot 1928, p.9). (4) The cooking of the postwar era was *traditional* bourgeois cuisine – women’s cooking, regional recipes – without the superfluous. Sauces remained ‘indispensable’ for achieving infinite variety in dishes. However, the theory of French home cooking by this time was many more steps removed from the grand cuisine of the nineteenth century. The

wartime practice of making white sauce with butter but without egg yolk liaison survives in the new Audot. There is also more emphasis on the nutritional properties of ingredients in this and other postwar cookbooks.

The 1925 (third) edition of Philéas Gilbert’s *Cuisine de tous les mois* (Cooking Month by Month), first published in 1893, swapped out old recipes for more modern ones because ‘in the last 30 years – but especially since the war – cooking has evolved, as have all the sciences’ (1925, p.xi). New tastes, Gilbert wrote, demanded a new *cuisine ménagère et bourgeoise* – ‘une cuisine nouvelle’ (a new middle-class cuisine) that was a ‘turn toward simplicity, to the honest and the natural’ (p.xi). This edition claims to have jettisoned ‘pompous presentations’ of the old style of nineteenth-century cooking found in the first (1893) edition.

The most popular women’s periodical devoted to cooking and domestic economy, *Pot-au-Feu*, reflects the same postwar concerns and lifestyle changes as the cookbooks. In contrast to the kinds of recipes and advice featured before the war, *Pot-au-Feu* articles of the 1920s offer more ‘economical’ recipes and recipes that writers identify as ‘*la vieille cuisine bourgeoise*’ (traditional middle-class cooking). (5) New contributors to the magazine included authors of regional cookbooks and at least one author of wartime cookbooks. In recognition of the reduction in the number of middle-class households with servants and cooks after the war, one *Pot-au-Feu* contributor tells readers that Les Halles central market was no longer exclusively the domain of domestics, noting that merchants do not necessarily raise their prices when they see a middle-class woman approaching. But the surest way to get the ‘*juste prix*’ (fair price) was to become educated on the qualities of fresh foods so as to recognize what you should and should not buy (Gilbert 1924, pp.22–25). The magazine tutored readers on such things as how to tell, for example, whether meat was steer, cow, or bull in order to avoid paying the high price of good beef when the butcher was actually selling older, tougher cow meat. Articles in the postwar issues of *Pot-au-Feu* tried to appeal to a broader range of incomes, and there were fewer illustrations depicting the mistress of the house consulting with her servant-cook. More often, in the postwar decade, a *soignée* young woman stands alone at her stove. A theme throughout the postwar issues is how to adapt to life without servants.

The domestic science movement also entered a new chapter in the 1920s in response to the social and economic changes brought about by the war. Paulette Bernège, founder of the *Ligue d’organisation ménagère* (League for Household Organization) in 1925, was the driving force behind remaking women’s approach to housework according to the principles of the interwar scientific organization movement. Whereas Moll-Weiss’s prewar pedagogy had focused on working-class women and social reform, Bernège ‘sought to establish norms for what was to be an increasingly common model of domestic

organization in the twentieth century: the middle-class home without servants' (Clarke 2011, p.73). In applying management theory to the home, Bernège positioned the middle-class woman as a manager 'who ran a scientifically organized home,' thus removing the stigma of menial domestic chores (p.75). Importantly, these chores included food shopping and cooking for one's own family.

Books on regional cuisines, a small publishing trend before the war, enjoyed immense popularity after. Enthusiasm for regional recipes was compatible with both the nationalistic mood and the contracted budgets in French households. The material culture of French kitchens changed very little in the 1920s and 1930s, and traditional dishes did not require spending on new kinds of cookware and kitchen tools. Tiny Parisian kitchens were not modified to fit the new household appliances popular in interwar America, nor was there much change in the food shops and neighborhood markets where French home cooks habitually shopped each day (see Furlough 1993). Traditional and regional French recipes also helped accomplish a postwar state priority as they were based on fresh, local ingredients, not expensive imported foodstuffs that neither the people nor the government could afford to consume.

The extended crisis of *la vie chère* and the wartime provisioning failures that were apparent in Parisian markets had shaken people's faith in the reliability of the urban food supply (Claffin 2006). Indeed, the destiny of postwar France was uncertain and insecure. Anxiety over the material and financial devastation caused by the war fueled the inward-looking French gastro-nationalism of the 1920s. One of the great champions of regionalism, Radical Socialist politician Edouard Herriot and many other French leaders expected postwar culinary tourism to bring wealthy foreigners eager to spend money on a taste of France *in situ* (Claffin 2007).

Culinary professionals shared the sentiment that 'the renaissance of regional cuisine [...] the gourmet specialties that used to make so many provincial establishments famous' would serve as a magnet pulling the rest of the world into all parts of France and help to rebuild the nation's lost wealth (Pellaprat 1921). While foreign tourists flocked to regional gastronomic meccas, the home cook could, in the words of Augusta Moll-Weiss, turn to 'old provincial formulas that will give the family table the intimate character that distinguishes the *table d'hôte* of a restaurant' (1912, Preface). The era celebrating regional traditions and 'grandmother's cooking' was in full swing and would endure throughout the interwar years.

Notes

1. The phrase harkened back to the French Revolution when the state discourse linked food rationing and patriotism.
2. Looking back to Menon's book is not as unlikely as it may seem. *La cuisinière bourgeoise* was a bestseller in

France, published every year from 1746 to 1853, even during the French Revolution.

3. For mayonnaise without eggs, make a *béchamel* sauce and add in oil one drop at a time (138). For flan without eggs, agar-agar (made from seaweed) was used as a thickener (138).
4. The 1860 edition of Audot's *La Cuisinière de la campagne et de la ville* was used for comparison. The 1928 revision of Audot's book, loved by at least three generations of French women, was entrusted to Henriette Babet-Charbon, a specialist in domestic science.
5. *Pot-au-Feu* suspended publication during the war.

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