2020

Review of Rick Fantasia French Gastronomy and the Magic of Americanism (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2018)

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Recommended Citation

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, Review of Rick Fantasia French Gastronomy and the Magic of Americanism (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2018), *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, Volume 20, 2020, 100205, ISSN 1878-450X, DOI: 10.1016/j.ijgfs.2020.100205.
(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1878450X20300457>)

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Commentaries & Points of view

Review of Rick Fantasia *French Gastronomy and the Magic of Americanism* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2018)

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Two years after the death of legendary French chef Paul Bocuse at the age of 91, the 2020 *Michelin Guide* to France demoted his landmark Lyon restaurant *L'Auberge du Pont de Collonges*, which had continuously held three Michelin stars since 1965, to a two-star rating. Rick Fantasia's book *French Gastronomy and the Magic of Americanism* (2018) opens with the death of another celebrity three-Michelin-starred chef, Bernard Loiseau, who committed suicide in 2003 at the age of 52. At the time of his tragic death, his eponymous restaurant *La Côte d'Or* had slipped from 19/20 to 17/20 in the *Gault & Millau Guide* and there were rumours that the *Michelin Guide* were considering its demotion from three stars to two. These rumours proved unfounded, and interestingly the restaurant managed to retain its three-star-rating under executive chef Patrick Bertron and Loiseau's widow Dominique for a further 15 years before a demotion to two stars in 2018. The primary object of Fantasia's investigation are the cracks that appeared in the system of French gastronomy from the mid-1970s through the 1990s. During this period, the logic of three-starred Michelin French chefs' social worlds changed as they began to straddle the differing spheres of haute gastronomy and industrial food production, leveraging their symbolic capital for financial capital. Fantasia performs a form of 'social autopsy' and interrogates whether this change may have influenced or even been partly culpable for Loiseau taking his own life.

Rick Fantasia is a Professor of Sociology whose ties with France go back almost five decades. The author dedicates the book to the memory of two important friends, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu whose theories shape the book, and to Fantasia's father-in-law, René Métal, a French chef. Insights into the world of French gastronomy from Métal coalesce with the author's previous interest in labour history and union organisation. This well-researched book, thanks in part to access to an archive of trade journals from his father-in-law, explores the consecration role of *Michelin* to the cultural field of French gastronomy using Pierre Bourdieu's field theory.

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1940–2018) previously explored gastronomy as a cultural field using Bourdieu's field theory. She characterised it as, 'structured by the distinction between the material product – the food stuffs, the dish or the meal – and the critical, intellectual, or aesthetic by-products that discuss, review and debate the original product' in her seminal article ('A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in 19th Century France', 1998). Ferguson built her

argument using the texts of Brillat-Savarin and de La Reynière, along with the works of master chef Marie-Antonin Carême (1784–1833) and philosopher Charles Fourier (1772–1837). Fantasia brings this argument firmly into the twentieth century and beyond, using the *Michelin* and *Gault & Millau* travel guides and trade journals such as *Néorestauration* as well as culinary competitions such as the *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* (MOF) as newer forms of consecration. Two opposing logics, artisan high French gastronomy in the form of three-star fine dining, and industrial fast food, epitomised by the American McDonalds model, are juxtaposed within this book. Fantasia explores how the two conflicting forms begin to coalesce in the 1970s and 1980s, beginning with three-starred-chef Michel Guérard transferring his symbolic capital as a celebrity chef to economic capital by consulting with the frozen food industry and allowing them to add his name to frozen ready meals. This was the beginning of the unorthodox partnerships between three-starred chefs such as Bocuse, Senderens, Robuchon, Veyrat, Ducasse, Bras, and Loiseau, with multinational industries such as Nestlé, Danone, Carrefour, Disney Corporation and Sodexo. Indeed, a caricature of this phenomenon features in the 2007 Pixar animated movie 'Ratatouille' where chef Gusteau's name and image are used to market a range of foodstuffs from Italian frozen pizza to Mexican burritos.

The first section of the book tracks the history of gastronomy in France. It brings the reader on a journey from the origin of the restaurant, through the *Belle Époque* days of Escoffier and Ritz to Curnonsky's 'gastronomades', who linked the exploration of French regional cuisine with the new phenomenon of the automobile and thereby connecting Michelin, a tyre company (industrial), with gastronomy (artisanal). Issues such as culinary nationalism, which will be of interest to the novice reader, are explored; however, scholars such as Stephen Mennell, Amy Trubek, Jean-Robert Pitte and Rebecca Spang have previously charted these topics. The true strength of the book lies in how the author tracks the industrialisation of food in America and later in France, and how he convincingly argues that France was wooed by the 'magic' of Americanism. This magic worked on a number of levels. Some French entrepreneurs travelled to America as part of the Marshall Plan to familiarise themselves with modern American industry, others gained work experience or attended college or training workshops stateside where they were 'hypnotized by the dazzlingly

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2020.100205>

Received 18 February 2020; Accepted 18 February 2020

Available online 19 February 2020

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innovative business techniques of American capitalism' (p.135). Co-founder of Accor, the French multinational hospitality company, Paul Dubrue, founded Novotel in 1963 having returned from a year in Dayton, Ohio, as assistant to Bernardo Trujillo, who was known as the 'Prophet of Selling' or 'The Oracle of Distribution' and had been previously pivotal in teaching American retail methods to the cofounders of the Carrefour chain of supermarkets.

The magic of Americanism also affected French adolescents. They were attracted to American cultural iconography 'like moths to a flame'. The magical dazzle coming from the 'coolness' and cutting edge of American cultural practices which also led to the rise of super and hypermarkets in France. A strange dichotomy exists whereby in America, French or European food and culture carried a certain *cachet*, while the French considered this new American style fast food to embody its own brand of 'cultural capital'. It is interesting to note the number of French fast food restaurants that adopted the American model but adapted it to a French tradition, such as *Brioche Dorée* founded in 1976, which is now the second largest bakery/café chain in the world. Its founder Louis Le Duff had spent three years working for restaurant chains in America before returning to France and opening his food businesses.

This American model of high-volume production of standardised goods using special-purpose machinery and predominantly unskilled labour, along with a host of systematic management techniques and organisational structure, represented the antithesis of traditional French artisanal practices. From a culinary perspective, arguably, Escoffier's adaption of 'Taylorism' may have laid the structure for this transformation. Fantasia critically examines French food practices and highlights how the mass production of cheese, wine, or charcuterie are disguised within the artisanal language of 'terroir' and the '*appellation d'origine contrôlée*' (AOC) system. The company that produces 60 percent of Roquefort cheese is a subsidiary of Lactalis, the multinational dairy products corporation, owned by the same family that produced over 40 percent of all French Camembert in 2003. Fantasia notes that Europeans abandoned traditional forms of grain production as early as the 1880s in the face of trade competition from American and Russian cereals (p.25). He questions whether the signature frogs' legs served in Loiseau's *Côte d'Or* restaurant could be considered French at all, given that they were probably sourced in either Eastern Europe, Texas, or Cuba due to a domestic frog shortage in France caused by the gradual

loss of marshland. He highlights how the French government introduced French food onto the curriculum of schools in the 1990s and how initiatives such as having the gastronomic meal of the French listed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage point to an active desire to preserve the French way of life in the face of rising globalisation.

This is a fascinating and illuminating book that deals with the nexus of where traditional French food and modern American business models meet and the associated fallout of this union. The erosion of the boundary surrounding these two transformed the field of gastronomy in France and elsewhere from the mid-1970s onwards. Starred chefs traded symbolic capital for economic capital from multinationals to drive financial success and expansion. This is reminiscent of the 'greenwashing' that is currently taking place where big corporations align with 'celebrity' chefs on social or environmental issues to portray a positive image, whereas their corporations are part of the cause of the initial problem. The trade-off primarily benefits the capitalist industries. As the book had been in the pipeline for over two decades, some of the language and statistics can jar slightly, feeling sometimes like a PhD thesis, which has finally been published over a decade later. This, however, is a minor criticism. Fantasia reminds us that there is no objective way of judging whether standards are dropping or rising in French, or indeed other, restaurants as the whole field of restaurant reviewing is completely subjective. Is the demotion of starred restaurants (Bocuse, Veyrat, Loiseau) from three to two stars about quality, or are they about guidebook authors flexing their muscles? Has *Michelin* moved its focus to Asia and North America and therefore no longer fears upsetting the traditional gods of high French gastronomy? The relationship of the industrial (*Michelin*) with the artisan (chefs) may prove more parasitic than symbiotic.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest in this review.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2020.100205>.