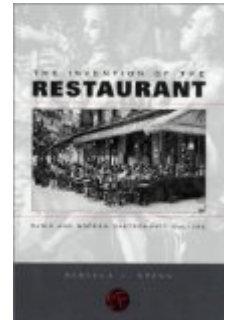


Rebecca Spang. *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000. x + 325 pp. \$36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00685-0.



Reviewed by Laura Levine Frader

Published on H-Urban (November, 2001)

>From Bouillon to Boeuf à la Mode: Politics and Gastronomy in Modern France

Few French cultural icons have elicited as much interest and critique as the restaurant. Restaurants are reviewed every bit as seriously as books, plays or concerts; and many who travel abroad delight in returning to our favorites, like old friends, or discovering new ones, armed with our *Guides Michelin* or our *Gaults-Millaus*. In addition to constituting one of the undeniable pleasures of modern urban life, restaurants play a leading role in the French hagiography of Taste and reputed culinary superiority. In addition to spawning a veritable micro-industry of food and restaurant criticism, they have been the subject of celebratory guides, and walking tours. But where did they come from and at what moment in French history did the restaurant acquire its status as a place to escape from the routine of daily life to enjoy a meal or meet friends? And when did the restaurant become a haven of gastronomy? Rebecca Spang addresses these questions and more through a cultural history that follows a trail from the political economy of the old regime,

to the restaurant as a new form of public space (and of private space, as well), development of manners and French urban life and politics.

Much of the literature on restaurants and dining places the birth of the restaurant in the early nineteenth century as a product of the French Revolution. In this view, the liberation of the market from the restrictions of pre-Revolutionary guilds of butchers and bakers (among others), in the context of an emerging bourgeois public sphere allowed these new institutions to flourish. Spang, however, analyses the restaurant not as an emblem of post-Revolutionary modernity, but as the outcome of pre-Revolutionary efforts to improve the quality of Parisian life and commerce. Not initially designed to serve multi-course meals in the grand style, the first restaurants took their name from one of their principal commodities: healthful and tasty bouillons known as *restaurants*, designed to literally restore (in French, *restaurer*) the weary or sickly travelers who came to Paris on business. Thus, the first of these establishments marked the intersection of cuisine and medicine, at least temporarily, before academic

medicine gradually came to look down upon the healthful properties of good soup. Other elements of this eighteenth century *nouvelle cuisine* --eggs, porridge, rice creams or puddings, and fruits--promised, like the *restaurants*, an alternative to the heavy mutton stews, pates, and sausages ordinarily served at the set meals provided by innkeepers at their *tables d'hote*. Royal endorsement gradually enabled these early establishments to escape the control of the guilds and gave them a new legitimacy in the public eye well before the Revolution did away with the guilds in 1792. In the process, restaurants gradually evolved to become the sites of a "public, gastro-nomic sensibility" (p. 7). And the popularity and the rate at which such establishments multiplied suggest that they indeed played a role in efforts to revive the Parisian economy in the 1770s. Even so staunch a critic of urban life as Jean-Jacques Rousseau approved of the simple cuisine of the first restaurants and their promise of unadulterated repasts typical of the Savoyard countryside to which he eventually retreated.

By the 1780s, on the eve of the Revolution, and indeed during the Revolution, restaurants began to assume the characteristics of the modern institution that we know today. More and more restaurants incorporated complete, individualized meals on their menus--skate in black butter, partridges, roast chickens, fish stews, and cooked vegetables. And indeed the printing of menus listing several dishes from which patrons could choose was itself an innovation. But these developments accompanied another: for in developing a more extensive culinary repertoire, the restaurant was also in the process of becoming not merely a place to eat, but a new form of public space--and a public space to which restaurateurs invited not only men, but women as well. Thus Spang includes the restaurant as part of the formation of the eighteenth century public sphere--although, as she artfully points out, it did not constitute a 'public' place in the same way as the cafe or freemasonic loges. Indeed, the restaurant illustrates the com-

plexity and ambiguity of public and private spaces. "In a restaurant, the customer supping on bouillon at one table did not enter into a rational debate with the stranger at the next table who had just ordered chicken and vermicelli" (p. 86). No consensus was reached between the person eating veal at one table and beef at another. The public space of the restaurant involved private choices and the pursuit of personal and individual, not public or common tastes. It was, indeed, a "publicly private place" (p. 86) where the ambiguity of an evolving sense of the 'public' was thrown into relief. This became even more apparent in that the restaurants of the early nineteenth century boasted individual rooms where a couple could dine (among other things) privately, undisturbed by other guests or waiters.

Even if restaurants predated the Revolution, the political significance that the meal acquired during the revolutionary period was unmistakable in at least two ways. First, the outdoor fraternal banquets of the Revolution constituted one site of one sort of 'public.' Indeed the communal meal as a means of forging identification with the nation appeared regularly during the radical Jacobin phase, even if it came under criticism from parsimonious revolutionaries less convinced of the value of public feasts. It was in the debate over the symbol of the meal, Spang argues, that the modern version of the restaurant was forged, although the restaurant hardly incorporated all publics or signaled the advent of cultural democratization, even during the Revolution. For the majority of Parisians found themselves barely possessing the wherewithal to produce a *pot au feu* at home, much less purchase one cooked by someone else. Second, the political significance of the restaurant could hardly be missed in the arrest of Louis XVI at Varennes, who, consumed by hunger, was caught in the act of wolfing down a meal of pigs' feet at a local restaurant during his attempt to escape from France.

Nonetheless, the restaurant gradually became divorced from the politics of eating and came to acquire the reputation in the early nineteenth century as a "zone of pleasurable freedoms." (148) How this happened and how the French restaurant came to be defined as a site of gastronomy had much to do with how the restaurant entered the world of artistic and literary conversation through the restaurant review. Public debate and criticism played their role in the invention of the institution itself. And part of its development owed much to its development as distinctly Parisian and as a particularly urban reference point. The opening years of the nineteenth century moreover, Spang argues, constitute the moment when an awareness of national differences in diet emerges and where restaurants begin to serve as gauges of national distinction. Spang notes Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's judgement that taste was as much of an innate sense as sight or hearing that had little to do with social class. As this may well have been the case, one nevertheless misses knowledge of the clients of these new establishments. Spang assumes, rather than examines, the development of social groups and classes that could afford to indulge in the artistic passion of eating during the first third of the nineteenth century, seemingly willing to accept the claims of nineteenth century critics that the gourmand stood "endowed with a status that corresponded only poorly to any more mundane system of estates or classes" (p. 158). If 'gastronomic equality' (meaning equality of taste) had a democratizing potential, this arguably meant little to those who could ill afford to enter the new palaces of pleasure. This raises another question that is elided in Spang's otherwise beautifully crafted and scrupulously researched study, for surely not all restaurants were alike. A vast cultural divide separated the early nineteenth century popular neighborhood eatery from the highly reputed (still today) Grand Vefour in the Palais Royal and its ilk. It is precisely the focus on the restaurant as a cultural institution that constitutes

the strength of the book but at the same time allows Spang to soft pedal the important connections between class and taste that emerged in this period.

One of the most interesting chapters of the book, 'Hiding in Restaurants,' examines the contradictory functions of the restaurant as a public private space. Here is where lovers dined in the private rooms of elite and not so elite establishments; here also is where the oppositional politicians of the late 1840s hid from the scrutiny of police. For, although they patrolled cafes on a regular basis, police could less easily practice surveillance in restaurants. The fact that dinners lay outside the jurisdiction of July Monarchy law prohibiting regular meetings of political groups meant that restaurants could be available for the banquets of 1847-1848. For, as Spang writes paraphrasing Edgar Allen Poe, it is indeed in the "public, shared and open spaces of modern life [that] things can best be hidden" (p. 232). In this sense the restaurant served many functions. A site of politics as well as pleasure, the restaurant reminds us that "public and private are not features of physical spaces, but of how people used those spaces" (p. 232). Although one might wish for a more thorough examination of the political uses of the protected realm of the restaurant in this pregnant period of republican banquets, Spang has provided more than merely a tasting menu, with plenty of substantial food for thought.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Laura Levine Frader. Review of Spang, Rebecca. *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5703>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.