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From Lviv to Lille: The Odyssey of a Gastronaut

Growing up on the Lower East Side of New York, I never thought I would become a "foodie," not even an academic one. But accidents shaped me, both personal and professional. This story begins with my mother, who was expertly trained in the ways of Ukrainian cooking by her mother, Anna Pidherny. My grandmother was from the village of Micolaiuw, which is just outside of Lviv in Poland. She married Basil Dzadoiw from the nearby village of Pidhaichik. An official at Ellis Island changed Dzadiw into Jadoff and Basil later became William, but the grandchildren all knew him as Toots.

I never saw Toots in the kitchen. But for our Sunday visits Anna was always in the last throes of whipping up a pungent hot borscht with a huge meat bone anchoring it, followed by the main dish of mashed potatoes and her version of pierogi (which she pronounced pyroheh in Ukrainian). All over Europe, from Latvia to Germany, pierogi is probably the most popular dish because of the easy availability of its simple ingredients: ground meat or potatoes caressed by a fried cabbage leaf lovingly dipped in sour cream.

Dessert was rugelach, each pastry looking like a snail scratching its back, and as small as my thumb—which meant that I could eat two at a time, crunching my way through walnuts and cinnamon. (Apricots, often included in recipes for rugelach, were too rare and expensive in the 1950s to be found in the fruit basket on my grandmother's table.)

At Easter, the tiny rugelach were overshadowed by an impressive cake-bread, looking like the prow of a ship: a towering babka, the reward for giving up sweets for Lent. It was dry enough to need butter, but with a touch of sweetness from the occasional raisin. (Having suffered through the Depression, my grandmother economized even on her own creations, since there were at most five raisins in her 9-inch-high babka.)

This, then, was the kind of menu my mother, Mary, was prepared to cook when she married my Irish-American father, William Tobin. Alas, he would have none of it. 'Twas beef and boiled potatoes for him, and the occasional pasta dish out of respect for his favorite restaurant, Russo's, on 14th street and Avenue B, the kind of Mom and Pop place that has largely disappeared from the American dining scene. My mother's patience with the new cuisine was sorely tried on Fridays when, as all good Catholics before 1966, we had to practice abstinence from meat. It wasn't that she was not inventive: she figured out that pasta, eggs, and fish were acceptable substitutes. (Pizza was a lunch dish only.)

Having been educated in Eastern European cooking, what she did with the meat substitutes, or rather to them, would have been cause for arrest by the Julia Child Culinary Constabulary. The pasta, always of the thinnest spaghetti, suffered a horrible death by drowning in a bitter tomato sauce. Although I cannot now tell how she prepared scrambled

eggs, I do recall that even a half-bottle of Heinz's best ketchup could not disguise the awful texture: the eggs seemed to come alive, with slivers seeking escape from my mouth. I won't attempt a description of what flounder (forever flounder) became in my mother's hands. Let's simply say that the First-Avenue fishmonger should have banned her from the premises, for the greater benefit of society.

When we didn't get to have Sunday dinner at my grandmother's, we had it at home. The memory still chills. It was either tasteless chicken soup, followed by boiled chicken; or it was roast beef—not the kind Dickens celebrated, but a large slab of meat, wallowing in juice, that had apparently been attacked by wild animals since it had not visibly been carved but rather torn apart.

This was my family gastronomical inheritance until I went to France as a Fulbright Scholar in 1959. Since starting the study of French at Regis high school in New York City, I had been excited by the stories of French culture, especially of the Age of Louis XIV. They were told to me by my aunt Anne Jadoff, who had graduated from Hunter College at the age of 19 with a French major. I heard that she did not attend graduation because the family could not afford the \$5 for the rental of the academic cap and gown. Around 1995 she talked about traveling and even applied for and received a passport, but she never got to set foot in her beloved France. Her last word, when near death in 2005, was "bonjour."

Aunt Annie, in her quiet way, was so passionate about France that I couldn't wait to live there. When I did, it was a revelation in every respect: social, political, intellectual, literary, and above all, gastronomical. I learned, to my joyful amazement, that if you avoided the student canteen with its daily special of pale green tripe, you could savor complex dishes disguised as simple fare in many of the nearby restaurants. The history of French cuisine is just that: an ever-proclaimed drive for the simple and the natural that conceals hours of trial and error before finding the formula. My late friend Julia Child offers eloquent examples of this laborious process of 10% conception and 90% perspiration in her posthumous book, *My Life in France*. For example, she recalls trying every one of the 200 different chicken recipes contained in the *Larousse Gastronomique*, and rejecting them all. At times she grew uncertain about ever finishing her book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, because "Each recipe took so long, so long, to research, test, and write that I could see no end in sight" (p. 195).

I must admit that my first meal in a restaurant in France was far from reaching the gastronomical height that Julia enjoyed when first off the boat in Rouen in November 1948. She had an epiphany over *sole meunière*. I, on the other hand, in September 1959, chose to be safe and ordered a pizza. It was unrecognizable: a two-inch high crust surrounding four inches of a cheesy diameter on which two star-cross'd

anchovies lay dying. As their forbears had eventually done in the seventeenth century, the French refused to follow the Italian model and fashioned their own “vision.” The Italian pizzas were as imposing as their piazzas, while the French reconceived the pie according to their intimist conception of space: compare Saint Peter’s square with La Place des Vosges.

Despite the inauspicious first repast, as a Fulbright scholar I was treated to extraordinary meals in local homes in the provincial city of Lille and across the close Belgian border. They were, to say the least, “different” from my family experiences. A series of courses, smaller portions, a more formal presentation, a choice of wines, and, above all, a wonderful orality that linked the food and the talk. Remembrance of meals past is a common theme among French convives, as is the refreshing habit of divulging personal details with friends: “se mettre à table” means both “to sit down at table” and “to open up, to confess.” As a number of French writers have said about the French at table: it’s always *les mets et les mots*—courses and conversation.

Of course, not every meal inspired ecstasy. My wife and I attended a banquet for the University of Lille basketball team, for which I played center. (At 6’2” I was taller than anyone in France at that time except for General De Gaulle and he couldn’t hit the hook shot.) The main dish was undercooked quail. It evidently resented its

disrespectful preparation and took out its revenge on the two of us for a couple of days.

That fateful year of 1959-60 I was occupied with finishing my PhD thesis at Princeton on the influence of Roman writers on French classical tragedy, which became my first book, *Racine and Seneca*. (Despite my wife's urging, I resisted the temptation to aspire to the best-seller list by changing the title to *Sex and the Single Stoic*.) It was only decades later that I returned to my cultural introduction to France by analyzing the way that the great comic dramatist Molière turned food imagery into literature. Molière took good advantage of the growing interest in food preparation and service in seventeenth-century France by integrating allusions to cuisine and gastronomy in ten of his plays, from his first five-act comedy, *The School for Wives* (*L'Ecole des femmes*) to his last, the comedy-ballet *The Imaginary Invalid* (*Le Malade imaginaire*). Most notably, in *The Miser* (*L'Avare*) the four soups that his chef proposes to the main character are taken textually from the four items that open the section on *potages* in the first modern cookbook to be published in France since the end of the Middle Ages, *Le Cuisinier francais* by La Varenne in 1651.

Initiating the project by marking out a comfortable space in the Reserve Book Vault of the library of the University of California at Santa Barbara where I read cookbooks from the Medieval period to the nineteenth century, I eventually spent ten years of research on

anthropology, ethnology, history, sociology, literature and literary criticism. Understanding that the history of alimentation is the fundamental stuff of history itself, I investigated the choice of dishes, their preparation and cooking, service and spectacle, taste, taboo, and pleasure as precious witnesses to the march and mores of society. Since such fundamental acts had to be reflected in literature, I studied the culinary references in the work of an author who practiced his art during a period reputed to be chary of allusions to daily life. Yet, upon close examination, I found that the theater of Molière abounds in images of corporeal acts of all kind, from eating to sex to what passed for the medical “arts” in the seventeenth century.

As a neophyte to the, as yet, unnamed discipline of food studies, I needed help deciphering the assumptions in the early cooking manuals. Julia Child, part-time Santa Barbara resident at the time, came to the rescue. Indeed, she proved to be indispensable at the very outset of my project because she had the right connections. She introduced me to the Culinary Historians of Boston, whose wisdom substantially broadened my perspective on foodways in early modern Europe. With a passion for the social history of food, these historians often draw on the rich resources of the Schlesinger Library of the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University for scholarly pursuits into nutrition. The most important member for me at that point was Barbara Wheaton whose 1983 tome, *Savoring the Past: The French*

Kitchen and Table from 1300 to 1789, became the bible for research into food in France.

I got to know Julia especially well for the last ten years of her life when she became a full-time resident in Santa Barbara. During that time she taught me more about the diplomacy of tasting than about the preparation of meals—at which I remain an amateur in both senses of the term. Whenever we went to lunch or supper, she would always reserve her criticisms—“the beets were soggy” or “French wine would have been a better bet”—for the ride home. Most of all, it was her enthusiastic way of greeting people on the phone that I miss about her. “RON! How are you?” made me feel that I was the only person in the world that counted for her. But the truth is that she had many friends, and they all admired the way she could remember a tale about dining with friends that became the heart of her memoirs. She connected food and life in her writings as she did every day of her existence. For her all guests were, as the French have it, *compagnons* or *copains*, those who break bread together.

Since most writing about food is upbeat and imaginative, the decade of the 1980s was inspirational for me, especially as I followed the excited explosion of cooking manuals that began back in the seventeenth century with *Le Cuisinier français*. Perhaps the prime modern example of the rapport between sauce and style occurs in the writings of M/F.K. Fisher. Never satisfied with practice alone, Fisher

suffused it with theory. The influence of Brillat-Savarin's *Physiologie du goût* in particular haunts her work. It is no wonder, then, that she has given us a remarkable translation, *The Physiology of Taste* (1948), that earned high praise as being the King James version of the 1848 text. I am surely not the only person who thought that she deserved the Nobel Prize in Literature for her finely nuanced stories of love for food as it was revealed through love of place and people.

My personal contribution to this literary genre was my book, *Tarte à la crème: Comedy and Gastronomy in Molière's Theater*, also published in Italian. This ground-breaking work reoriented my career and offered the scholarly world a new perspective on matters of taste in the French Classical Age. I demonstrated that one of the principal criteria of distinction in a very class-conscious age resided in the ability to conceive and express judgments about refined acts of ingestion. My conversion to what I call gastrocriticism (a potentially explosive approach, to be sure) has paid multiple dividends, for I am often called upon to contribute to colloquia in a variety of countries as the appointed "gastronaut," speaking to the lexicon of food and drink that enriches most literary texts from Homer to Hemingway and beyond.

I also eat better.

And yet...

On my rare trips back to New York, I sometimes wander down to

the old streets, walking beside those ancient tenements, and I can smell the rugelach. I can smell the pierogis. And I'm a boy again, heading to see grandma. To smell the borscht. To find the raisins. On a morning when I do not yet know that ahead of me lies France.