



Prêt-à-Manger

Why the French Have Their Cake and Eat It, Too

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Even if you weren't aware of the rising intensity of debates over food politics in recent years, the face-off between Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama probably caught your attention. One of Michelle Obama's most high profile acts as First Lady was to plant an organic food garden on the White House lawn—ironically later found to be contaminated by sewage-sludge-based fertilizer, rendering the lovingly grown vegetables off limits. The launch of the Obama Foodorama (the First Lady's foodie blog) and "Let's Move" (Obama's cause célèbre child anti-obesity campaign) soon followed. Palin's subsequent attacks on Obama's "interference" in personal food choices culminated in her visit to a Pennsylvania primary school, where Palin publicly proffered cookies to schoolchildren, in a presumed attempt to warn them of nanny state "food police."

The Palin-Obama food fight (farical as it might seem) indicates the polarization in America's food wars. Underpinning this debate are two sets of diametrically opposed views: "personal responsibility" versus "government regulation"; and "conventional" versus "alternative" agriculture. Supporters of conventional approaches argue that intensive agricultural production and associated government subsidy schemes are our best bulwark against food insecurity and farm-family penury; they reject calls to use government policy to promote more "healthful" foods, arguing in favor of personal responsibility and consumer choice (and, hence, markets as the locus of solutions). The "alternative" food movement, in contrast, tends to favor Michael Pollan-esque Small Ag

solutions, celebrating organic production and locavore consumption (although its proponents tend to be agnostic, or divided, on the question of market versus government action). The result is often a confrontation between "Big Ag" and "Food Snobs."

But what if these options weren't a stark either/or? What if, in other words, this is a false dilemma? Consider the case of France, which is the world's fourth-largest exporter of agricultural and processed food products (despite being ranked twenty-first in terms of population size) and Europe's largest agro-industrial producer. Although agro-industry is its largest industrial sector, France is also the country that personifies Small Ag, as symbolized by the *paysan* and the *terroir* so dear to the French: local farmers who live and work on the landscape to which consumers have adapted both buying habits and regional cuisines. The French have never forgotten what North Americans are now trying to relearn with foodie fads like the *100-Mile Diet*, whose authors spent a year eating only food grown within a hundred miles of their home. French consumers' tastes are demanding, as any visit to a local food shop or market will quickly reveal. Agro-industrial producers have adapted accordingly (and haven't necessarily suffered for it, if the performance of multinational companies such as Danone is any indication). In short, the French have their cake and eat it, too: a highly modern, efficient, profitable food system and the tasty, fresh, local products that foodies crave.

This suggests a new twist on the famous French paradox, which has had scientists scratching their heads for years: French adults eat higher amounts of fat and spend twice



as much time eating, yet are less overweight and very rarely obese, and have lower rates of heart disease than Americans. The much-debated explanations—more exercise? more vegetables? fewer calories? more red wine?—have generated some wonderful, even wacky, scholarship, such as a transatlantic comparison of McDonald’s meals that found that a serving of “medium fries” was 72 percent larger in Philadelphia than in Paris.

But less attention has been paid to the reasons *why* the French have a food system that enables them to eat this way. One reason is that Common Agricultural Policy—largely shaped by French interests—differs from its U.S. counterpart (the Farm Bill) in important ways. Both pieces of legislation have been heavily criticized for over-production, a relative neglect of the environmental impacts of industrial farming practices, and the suppression of prices via commodity “dumping” in other countries—threatening farmers’ livelihoods. But leaving these largely valid criticisms aside, there are still some positive examples we might take from the CAP. First, it supports the domestic production of fresh fruits and vegetables to a greater degree than the Farm Bill (although public health is not an explicit goal of the CAP). In contrast, the U.S. Farm Bill provides a greater degree of support to fewer products, among them wheat and feed grains, oilseeds, cotton, sugar, and dairy. Critics such as Marion Nestle argue that the Farm Bill’s subsidies are misguided, and encourage over-production of foods detrimental to public health (such as high-fructose corn syrup), thereby contributing to the national obesity epidemic. Put simply, agricultural policy now operates at cross-purposes with public health goals. But the example of the CAP suggests that it doesn’t need to be this way.

School lunch policy also highlights the differences in food politics in France and the United States. Every day, the U.S. Department of Agriculture pays schools for more than thirty million school lunches on a per-meal-served basis, partly in cash and partly in kind (through direct donation of agricultural commodities). Critics argue that the National

School Lunch Program largely neglects fresh fruits and vegetables; some go even further, and assert that a nutritional disaster has resulted from the program’s focus on products such as corn, soy, and potatoes that convert into nutritionally poor processed foods. Food reform advocates argue that this bias arises in part because food industry profit is prioritized over educational and public health goals, creating conflicting incentives in agricultural policy, food aid, and school food policy.

In France, in contrast, agricultural policy and food policy are more clearly separated, at least when it comes to school lunches—served to six million French children every day. The French Ministry of Education sets stringent regulations: vegetables and fruit have to be served at every meal (raw one day, cooked the next); some foods—notably fried food, ketchup, and sweetened desserts—are served no more than once per week. Vending machines are banned in all French schools, and children are strongly discouraged from bringing lunches from home (and generally don’t). Implementing these regulations falls to municipalities, which have complete control over the three-course (*bien sûr!*) menus and food sourcing—which is often used to support local food producers. Costs are recovered locally, with transfers from the national government to municipalities for specific programs—such as the CAP-sponsored fresh fruit campaign. Cross-subsidies enable all children access to the same high-quality meals. In Paris, for example, children of the wealthiest families pay \$7 per meal, but the lowest price is just 18 cents (with the average meal costing approximately \$3, only slightly more than the average cost for U.S. school lunches). The French approach means that meals are both affordable and healthy (not to mention tasty)—and don’t get caught up in special-interest politics at the national level.

Now, how might the French (and European) approach inform American food fights—for example, the current Farm Bill debate? When American policy makers refer to the CAP, they usually focus on the total dollar amount of subsidies, in order to bolster arguments about maintaining levels of farm subsidies in the United States. But instead of focusing on the existing subsidy system, what



if we took inspiration from France's broader approach to the food system?

We might start by considering how the political economy and cultural economy of food are interrelated: through exploring, for example, how questions of food are entangled with issues of identity and citizenship, as much as nutrition and health. To begin, we might pay a visit to the French International Agricultural Salon: the world's largest agricultural fair (and the largest annual event in Paris, outstripping even the fashion industry's trade fair). Every February, the Salon—with its tractor test-drives and dressage competitions, culinary samplings and wine tastings, bull semen sales and donkey petting zoos—brings together more than 1,000 exhibitors, 5,000 animals, and 600,000 visitors. It is a measure of its centrality to the French national psyche that President Nicolas Sarkozy chose the Salon to launch his new French gastronomy campaign in 2008. Declaring that French food was the best in the world, Sarkozy praised the role of farmers and food producers as the “source of our country's gastronomic diversity,” and announced that he was seeking recognition from UNESCO of the French gastronomic meal as global cultural heritage.

Sarkozy's statements and the UNESCO campaign sparked controversy in France and beyond. Foodies in France and abroad decried the “museification” of French *haute cuisine*, with some arguing that France was already at risk of ceding its cutting-edge status to other countries, notably Spain. And many questioned whether food could be considered “cultural” heritage. Yet the UNESCO award, as its defenders pointed out, was not targeted at gourmet cooking, but rather at something much more prosaic: the French family meal. Every day, more than 90 percent of French families sit down to a three-course family meal (in contrast, the 40 percent of American families who eat dinner together on a regular basis do so only two or three times per week, and 10 percent never eat dinner together at all). The primacy of the French family meal is so important that most major retailers outside of tourist areas close on Sundays and limit split shifts.

As Sarkozy reminded his detractors, his

campaign was focused not only on what the French eat, but also on *how* they eat: simply put, the rituals of the family table express the (albeit increasingly contested) norms of French citizenship, identity, and *patrimoine*—and thereby make a unique cultural contribution. After two years of debate, UNESCO agreed, awarding the status of “intangible cultural heritage” to the French gastronomic meal, which joined an illustrious list that includes Spanish flamenco, Chinese acupuncture, Azerbaijani carpet weaving, and Turkish oil wrestling. And the political significance of food in France was underscored by another event that took place the same day: European Parliament deputy José Bové was sentenced for uprooting a field of genetically modified corn in southwestern France. Bové—a longtime union activist with the *Confédération Paysanne*—first gained international recognition in 1999, when, in protest against threats to traditional French cuisine, he dismantled a McDonald's in his hometown of Millau, carting much of the building away and depositing the pieces on the lawn of the local town hall before being stopped by police. He is equally famous for his flamboyant defense of food sovereignty and local food production, smuggling fifty pounds of Roquefort cheese into the United States during the Battle of Seattle protests that same year. Bruno Rebelle, former director of Greenpeace France, summed up the subsequent outpouring of national support: “You see, in the United States, food is fuel. Here, it's a love story.”

*Sarkozy and Bové seem, at first glance, to be unlikely bedfellows in this love story. But their passion for protecting French food culture signals the ways in which the debates over the political economy of food complicate (and even transcend) traditional left and right allegiances. How, then, is food political for the French? As Adam Gopnik points out in *The Table Comes First*, the birth of both the restaurant and the café (in the modern sense) can be traced back to eighteenth-century France. One of the first laws passed by the National Assembly shortly after the Revolution in 1789 was a*



decree that made it legal to sell both coffee and alcohol (wine and spirits) in the same place—lending momentum to the new trend of public restaurants that had begun only a few decades before in the Palais Royal square. The subsequent emergence of Paris as the “Capital of Modernity” was centered, in part, on its unprecedented forms of sociopolitical discourse among *citoyens*—much of which took place in cafés and restaurants.

Indeed, it was in the French café that the three core principles of French gastronomy were developed. The first two principles are well known: good taste (*bon goût*) and good manners (*gastronomie*, or social rules governing both what and how one eats). But these principles are often misunderstood: *bon goût* is best understood as a shared rather than a snobbish sense of taste, to which all classes (not just the elites) have access; and *gastronomie* (which literally means “rules of the stomach”) is not a set of ironclad, oppressive regulations, but rather a set of satisfying food rituals (such as the four-course meal, the cheese course before dessert, the art of conversation at the table) shared by all *citoyens*.

But the third principle of French food—conviviality—is often overlooked by foreigners. The French never eat alone if they can help it, either at work or at home, and dining companions are often called *convives* (which means “table companion,” but literally translates as “living together”). Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the founder of modern gastronomy, argued that social discourse around the table was what distinguished dining from mere eating. The long meals shared by the French today (where many shops in provincial towns still close for up to two hours at lunch) express the importance of conviviality in defining the act of eating as a shared social practice. Indeed, French school lunches are based on the notion that access to healthy food is a precondition for effective participation in public life—although a lively debate has occurred in recent years over the failure to include *halal* and kosher foods in (and thus potentially exclude observant Jewish and Muslim students from) public school cafeterias.

This underscores the relevance of food to questions of citizenship. Food education is (for the French) one of the means by which modern states educate citizens to participate in the collective polity. As surprising as it may sound, food—as science, art, politics, and culture—is integrated into the school curriculum in France. Younger children, for example, develop sensory and gross motor skills through school gardens, visiting local markets, and learning about local foods; older children critically analyze media messages about food and learn about France’s *patrimoine culinaire* (culinary heritage) as part of their social studies lessons. The French National Ministry of Education makes this clear: “School is a privileged place in which children are educated about good taste, nutrition, and food culture. Good taste must be taught and learned, and can only be acquired over time.”

Most important: all children have equal access to good taste. Food education, for all French children, not just elites, is a form of citizenship training, where the republican principles of *égalité* and *fraternité* (expressed as the notion of “conviviality” in eating together) are put into practice. That this would seem alarmingly “socialist” to a segment of the American population illustrates the fact that food is by no means a straightforward signifier of citizenship—particularly in a multicultural society. Indeed, this is one case where the French might learn from the U.S. example, where inclusion is not framed as conformity, but rather as greater tolerance for a plurality of political views, cultural norms, and religious practices, as in the Dearborn, Michigan, schools that serve *halal* to Muslim schoolchildren, or the kosher Subway sandwiches that some school lunch programs offer.

Yet we might also learn something from the French. How, for example, might we tackle the question of personal versus social responsibility? The French case suggests that this opposition is misleading: a sustainable food politics requires both personal responsibility and collective action in order to create a better “food environment” (social, commercial, and institutional influences on food choice) as well as a more equitable, sustainable food production system. The French, for example, foster personal responsibility for eating well—



notably clever parenting practices that enable children to *mangent un peu de tout* (eat a little bit of everything). Yet the French state also supports families through food industry regulation and a relatively stringent approach to healthy school lunches. It is no coincidence that France's rate of child obesity is one of the lowest in the developed world, even as rates of overweight and obese children are at an all-time high and rapidly increasing in most wealthy countries, with the United States leading the pack. Yet the French government is not complacent: a slight rise in the (admittedly low) child obesity rates in the 1990s was met with a rapid response, including the above-mentioned reforms to school lunch nutritional requirements, the national ban on school vending machines, and a national nutritional campaign that included health warnings on televised snack food ads—all scientifically supported strategies for obesity reduction. Since then, child obesity rates in France have stabilized and even declined slightly. Many of these strategies have been advocated for decades in North America—to little or no avail.

The French example also suggests that food debates have the potential to transform, rather than entrench, existing political allegiances. After all, it was Sarkozy—a notably right-wing president—who oversaw the UNESCO award and also the tightening of already stringent school lunch regulations by the French National Ministry of Education; yet food is also important for a significant fraction of the French Left, as the Bové example suggests. Here at home, one could argue that food has the potential to transcend predictable partisan politics: everyone from evangelical homeschoolers to urban hipsters seems to be celebrating families, healthy food, and the humanizing role that growing and eating food can play in our communities.

This suggests that something like a French-style approach to funding school meals—in which local governments have greater control over menus, prices, and suppliers—might be politically feasible (although in the American case school lunch programs might also be sponsored by grassroots community organizations, which, in distinction from France, might also be eligible for funding). Indeed,

the high degree of “social capital” that would be required is already obvious in the numerous food-related community groups around the country, from Slow Food school lunch campaigners to Jamie Oliver-inspired “Food Revolution” mommy bloggers, to inner-city urban community gardeners. This might entail following the French example of devolving responsibility for the provision of school lunches to the local level, while setting stringent national nutritional standards—which would require radically reworking mechanisms for funding and sourcing school lunches. Here, recent discussions around the Child Nutrition Act and the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act (signed by the president in late 2010) have provided some potential pathways for change, such as the Farm to School grant program, which was designed to enable farmers to supply fresh produce to local schools. In continuing to reform this legislation, we might do well to look at the French focus on poverty as a central contributor to food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly through French insistence on cross-subsidies.

Taking the French example seriously might also mean that food politics campaigners might engage in more dialogue around strategies that would enable Big Ag to support and complement—rather than compete with—Small Ag. One French example is the *appellation d'origine contrôlée*—a geographical “origin” labeling scheme best known abroad for wine, but also used for other agricultural products. The AOC—overseen by a national regulator but governed by local producers co-ops—allows small-scale farmers to command a premium and access national markets—all based on the notion of *terroir*, that rich link

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between landscape, taste, and cuisine that the French have cultivated for centuries. Even vegetables can receive the label “AOC,” such as the *Coco de Paimpol* (a savory white bean) that comes from the tiny Paimpol region in western Brittany, but which is renowned and sold all over France. One of the main goals of the AOC program is to support farmer livelihoods and local, sustainable agriculture without excluding Big Ag. So some AOC “brands”—such as *poulet de Bresse* and *sel de Guérande*—are produced or distributed in large quantities by agro-industry, in an apparent win-win for French producers and consumers.

Granted, American food ways are still a far cry from the French ethic of sublimely moderate indulgence. But French *gastronomie* took centuries to develop, and the American foodie craze (which shows no sign of abating) celebrates an authentically American food culture. Regional cuisines—from Tex-Mex to Creole, Cajun to Floribbean—have a long history. So, too, does *terroir*, that “taste of place” synergy between cuisine, soil, climate, and food: think of California wines, Vermont maple syrup, or Alaskan salmonberries. (Read Rowan Jacobsen’s *American Terroir*.) An authentically American (and necessarily

multicultural) food culture is, of course, only part of the solution. Activists need to re-politicize the “alternative” food movement, squarely addressing the intersection of poverty, class, gender, and race with issues such as nutrition, food access, environmental toxins, environmental racism, and obesity.

Indeed, some food-system reformers are starting to ask these questions. What if, for example, we were to think of good food as an emblem of citizenship, rather than as fuel (or self-indulgent foodie-ism)? What if we were to reform the food system through aligning the interests of consumers with workers, farmers, and (yes) animals and the environment—a suggestion that has recently ignited debate amongst Slow Food chapters across America and beyond? What if food was a properly political topic, and a touchstone for socio-environmental justice? Maybe one day, just like the French, we might be able to have our cake, and eat it too.

Karen Bakker Le Billon is the author of *French Kids Eat Everything: How our family moved to France, cured picky eating, banned snacking, and discovered 10 simple rules for raising happy, healthy eaters* (Morrow/HarperCollins, April 2012). (karenlebillon.com)

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