

The Cook

Today, many celebrity chefs have acquired a status that places them on par with stars of film, pop, and sports, the descendants of royals in the—not always firm—firmament of celebrity. The Michelin Guide distributes stars to restaurants, and each year various magazines name one lucky individual the World's Best Chef. The Bocuse d'Or is the Oscar of cooking, and in the courtyard of Paul Bocuse's Lyon restaurant, the names of the winners are engraved in a culinary Walk of Fame. But these top chefs are as far from the average cook as were the *maitres queux* in princely courts during the Renaissance and the Baroque and the master chefs who won their fame within the new restaurant culture of the nineteenth century. Throughout history, ordinary cooks have suffered from a low status in society.¹

MANUAL WORK, BLOOD, DIRT, AND VICES

In the Middle Ages, when guilds were important in defining social rank, cooks were members of the less prestigious ones. In thirteenth-century Genoa, cooking was among the least well-remunerated trades. In fourteenth-century Florence, cooks belonged to the minor guilds, along with butchers, bakers, innkeepers, tanners, smiths, leatherworkers, and other humble tradesmen, while the more prestigious *Arte dei Medici, Speciali e Merciai* was the guild for doctors, apothecaries, and merchants who sold spices, dyes, and medicines.²

This low status is explained partly by the fact that cooks were recruited from the inferior social strata but also, to a certain extent, by the strenuous physical work the job entailed, which was not highly regarded by the elite responsible for maintaining the established value system. The aristocratic elite was physically active,

but their bodily exercise was limited by the codes of the warrior caste; the ideal pursuits were riding, fencing, and hunting. Hunting was considered not only entertainment for the nobles but also a serious preparation for military duty, an idea that goes all the way back to Aristotle and was repeated in the Renaissance by Machiavelli.³ And if the proud counts and barons contributed at all in the dining hall, it was by carving up the big roasts, an art carried out with tools resembling well-known weapons. But this was very far from handling bloody carcasses in cramped kitchens thick with heat and smoke (figure 1).

Blood was associated with cooking well into the twentieth century. Cooks—professionals as well as housewives—were responsible for the slaughtering of animals. Cookbooks had instructions on such work, some of which expressed empathy for the animals—“humane ways of slaughtering at home,” as it is phrased in one Danish cookbook from the late 1800s⁴—and how to pluck poultry. In fact, the descriptions were not too different from what we find in an English recipe from the Middle Ages: “Cut a swan in the rofe of the mouth toward the brayn of the hed, & let hym blede to deth.”⁵

Further back in antiquity, Greek society had *mageiroi*, religious officials who killed sacrificial animals for the rituals preceding big banquets, but *mageiroi* also sold meat at markets and prepared dinners for people wealthy enough to hire professional cooks with a more sophisticated culinary range than ordinary slave cooks.⁶

Heat and smoke were constant problems in kitchens. In 2010, French historian Patrick Rambourg, who was trained as a professional cook, described with great sensitivity how cooks discover that the fire—such an important ally in cooking—suddenly becomes an enemy “when it is not properly controlled.”⁷ Two centuries earlier, the celebrated culinary artist Antonin Carême presented a lamentation that probably expressed the feelings of many of his colleagues: cooks working in drafty, humid subterranean kitchens would develop painful rheumatism, while cooks above ground had to inhale the mortal fumes from burning charcoal. Even the arbiter of taste under the First French Empire, Grimod de la Reynière, who probably spent more time in the dining hall than in the kitchen, was concerned about the health of cooks and pointed out the dangers they were exposed to when faced with steam, smoke, and fire.⁸

The danger created by filth and dirt is another recurrent theme in many cookbooks throughout history; the concern with cleanliness and hygiene in these books almost amounts to an obsession. And this was of vital importance long before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when domestic science teachers gave it top priority. Around 1600, Francisco Martínez Montaña, chef at the Spanish court, opened his *Arte de cocina* (Culinary art) with these words: “In this chapter I plan to treat cleanliness, which is the most necessary and important.” In his list of priorities, he put cleanliness (*limpieza*) first, taste (*gusto*) second, and speed (*presteza*) third. A similar stress on perfect cleanliness is found in books written at several European

Ein new Kochbuch!

Das ist!

Ein Gründtli-

che Beschreibung / wie man recht vnd
wol / nicht allein von vierfüßigen / heymischen vnd wilden Thie-
ren / sondern auch von mancherley Vögel vnd Federwildpret / darzu von allem
grünen vnd düren Fischweert / allerley Speiß als geßotten / gebraten / gebacket / Presolen / Carbonaden / mancher-
ley Pasteten vnd Füllweert / Saltz etc. auß Teutsche / Dnerische / Hispanische / Italiaische vnd Frantz-
sische weisheit vnd zubereiten solle! Auch von allerley Gemüß / Obst / Saltz / Zens /
Confect vnd Larwegen / zubereiten etc.

Auch ist darinnen zu vernemen / wie man herrliche grosse Pandecten / sampt
gemeinen Gastrepen / ordentlich anrichten vnd bestellen soll.

Allen Menschen / hohes vnd nidriges Standes / Weibes vnd Manns / Personen / zu nutz / jedwede zum
erster in Druck gegeben / dergleichen vor nie ist außgegangen

Durch

M. Marren Rumpolt / Churf. Meinzischen Mundkoch.

Mit Röm. Keyserlicher Maiesstat special Priuilegio.



Sampt einem gründtlichen Bericht / wie man alle Wein vor allen zufällen
bewart / die besthafften widerbrüngen / Kräuter vnd andere Wein / Bier / Essig / vnd alle
andere Getränke / machen vnd bereiten soll / das sie natürlich vnd allen
Menschen vnschädlich / zu eruchen seindt.

Gedruckt zu Franckfort am Mayn / In verlegung
Sigmundi Feyerabendts / Peter Fischers / vnd
Hannich Tacken.

FIGURE 1. Title page of the second edition (1587) of *Ein new Kochbuch*, by Marx Rumpolt, private cook to the prince-elect of Mainz, first published in 1581 in Frankfurt am Main. The woodcut by Jost Amman shows a busy cook in the kitchen. Nasjonalbiblioteket, Oslo, qLib.rar.1065.

courts. In Poland, an administrator for a prince wrote in the preface of his cook-book that a cook must be clean and shaven, have combed hair, washed hands, and pared nails, and wear a white apron.⁹

If we are to believe authors of literary fiction, lack of hygiene is often the reason for low status among cooks. Roger “Hogge” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, who was not a court cook but rather a professional known for his skill in preparing tasty dishes—*blancmanger*, for example—has a skin eruption on his leg, suggesting an absence of personal hygiene.¹⁰

Drunkenness and greed are other vices often attributed to cooks. There is a tendency in food histories to mention northern Europe first in discussions of excessive alcohol intake, but there are sources that clearly demonstrate that this was also a problem in the southern part of the continent. In his household book from 1668, the Italian Francesco Liberati emphasized that cooks must not drink too much. He followed this assertion with a list of the damaging effects drunkenness will have on one’s cooking. The list is so specific that the author undoubtedly had experience with such bad habits.¹¹

“Greedy glutton” was a frequent expression in the fifteenth century. For example, it was used in the most popular book in German before the Reformation, Sebastian Brant’s 1494 moralist satire *Das Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*). Brant also linked greed to dishonesty, claiming that when their masters were out of the house, cooks ate and drank the best victuals to be found.¹² Some books directly accused cooks of stealing provisions or of helping themselves to more than they were entitled to in situations when board and lodging were part of their salary. The author of a 1584 Italian book about the duties of the chief steward noted that he needed to watch over the servants so they didn’t steal supplies.¹³

COOKS AND COOKERY JUDGED BY THE MORALISTS

In Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias*, Socrates is of the opinion that people who prepare food and drink for the citizens should not consider their activity important work, and Socrates mentions with evident disgust three representatives of these activities: a baker, a wine merchant, and Mithaikos, who wrote a book about Sicilian cuisine. Earlier, in one of his letters, Plato had written about how shocked he was when he discovered the gluttonous food culture in Sicily. The word he used for “cuisine” or “cookery” was *opsoniia*, which means preparation of *opson*. *Opson* had originally referred to what was served in a meal in addition to bread, and it included both fish and meat, but the word gradually took on a wider meaning as something delicious and dainty. In Greek texts from antiquity, terms such as “*opson-lover*” and “*opson-eater*” are used to describe people we would now call gourmets. The word *opson* comes up in a discussion in another dialogue by Plato, the *Republic*. In this work, Socrates describes what food should be served in the ideal state, and when

asked about *opson*, he mentions vegetables, fruits, and cheese. When Glauco—Socrates’s conversation partner—wants more refined *opson*, Socrates immediately tries to discredit such pleasure by comparing it to promiscuous sexual pleasure.¹⁴

In *Gorgias*, Socrates says that culinary art, just like rhetoric, has nothing to do with art (*techne*) but is only experience and practice, and that cookery, also like rhetoric, is false—it is flattery (*kolakeia*).¹⁵ The pleasure argument was taken up by the Roman moralists, especially the Stoics and Cynics. When Cicero presented his arguments about the value of different occupations, the bottom level was reserved for fishmongers, butchers, poulterers, and cooks, who shared the same status as perfumers and dancers. The common denominator of these trades was that they catered to sensual pleasure (*voluptas*).¹⁶

Early in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church declared gluttony (*gula*) to be one of the seven capital sins, and cooks—masters of good food, exquisite ingredients, and dainty dishes—could thus easily be considered dangerous tempters, luring people down the broad road to hell. Numerous paintings of hell, such as those by Hieronymos Bosch, make Carême’s description of subterranean kitchens seem like an amusement park. These works portray demons acting as cooks, sadistically enjoying roasting sinners on skewers, piercing them with iron forks, or letting them boil in large black cauldrons—that is, if they aren’t beating them with monstrous wooden ladles.¹⁷ The gluttons are literally stewed in their own juices, and the cooks are, to quote Sebastian Brant, the devil’s *braeters*, or *rôtisseurs*.¹⁸

There are also writings describing cooks in hell. *Le songe d’Enfer* (The dream of hell), a French text written in 1215, relates a dream of a visit to Inferno, where the narrator is served a menu of tasty dishes prepared by enthusiastic cooks. In this account, the gluttonous cooks are not alone in their suffering. There are stuffed and fried usurers, murderers marinated in garlic, pimply and wrinkly harlots prepared as game, baked heretics, and pies filled with tongues from liars and chatterboxes, and, as in Dante’s travelogue of the same region, not even the church representatives are excused: black monks are served with herbal sauce.¹⁹ In an English sermon written in the same century, a Dominican preacher blamed cooks directly for transforming cuisine from the simple bread and water that was present at “the begynnyng of the worlde” to food that was more for the pleasure of the body than for the sustenance of mankind, made “with grete busyness and with craft of cokys.”²⁰

The view of gluttony as a capital sin has its origins in the eastern Christian tradition of hermits and monks, which was influenced by the dualism in Hellenistic syncretistic religions, where contempt for the body was strong. Evagrius Pontikos (also known as Evagrius the Solitary), who lived in the fourth century, put gluttony first in his list of eight vices. Eating too much was only one aspect of gluttony as it was later defined by Johannes Cassianus, Pope Gregor the Great, and others; even worse was a passion for refined dishes, which were exactly what the best cooks were preparing.²¹ This was also the main point made by the Cistercian abbot Bernard of

Clairvaux when, with verbal wit and moral indignation, he criticized the food habits among the Benedictines in Cluny, decrying the new spices and foreign sauces they were using. One of the moralist attacks on gluttony from 1495 even mentioned specific dishes: partridges, quails, hazel grouses, capons, and geese, served with cameline sauce. The author may have leafed through a recently published book, *Le viandier* (The victualer), the first printed cookbook in France, which included recipes for all these birds and a special chapter about *sauce cameline*. The title page attributes the book to the “great chef of the King of France.”²²

THE COMIC COOK IN LITERATURE

Paintings of kitchen devils can easily create an impression that cooks are threatening figures, and as Ann Henisch documents, there are numerous stories about cooks using cleavers and flesh-hooks as weapons in scary situations.²³ In literary works, however, examples of cooks as clowns are more frequent. In comedies of the late Middle Ages, humor was created by associating cooks with bodily functions related to appetite: slurping, gulping, dribbling, slobbering, belching, burping, and what was generally referred to by the euphemism “wind”—all of which were behaviors that had earlier been common to all social groups but had from the Renaissance onward gradually become disapproved of by the elite. According to the sociologist Norbert Elias’s theory of the civilization process, this was part of a more universal pattern, a development toward a stronger control over one’s own body. Repugnance at touching greasy and sticky food led to the introduction of the individual fork as an indispensable part of the cutlery in daily use.²⁴ The comic effect in the late medieval plays was created by the contrast between the new table manners of the elite and the vulgar conduct of cooks and other common people. In seventeenth-century France, the rules of the classical drama (*la doctrine classique*), with its ideals of decency and decorum (*bienséance*), banned all references to bodily acts (*le bas corporel*) on the stage.

Also comical were the carnivalesque characters depicted in paintings (and allegorical dialogues), particularly popular during the Dutch and German Renaissance, of the great battle between Carnival and Lent, where the weapons were enormous ladles and forks, and the combatants wore pots on their heads instead of helmets. Peter Burke found it difficult not to interpret this as a way of ridiculing knights, as carnival was the period when the established order of society was turned upside down.²⁵ But why was this considered ridiculous? Perhaps it was because the paintings compared the noble estate to a group that was often exposed to mockery. There was a long tradition of using cooks, peasants, and other “simple” tradespeople linked to bodily work as stock characters in farces.

In comedies from antiquity, a different element brought about the humor. The Greek *mageiros* often appeared as a pompous, verbose, talkative person. In *The*

Boastful Chef, a study of the existing fragments of comic literature from the classical period, John Wilkins made the point that the boasters exaggerate their theoretical knowledge and philosophical mentality. In the conversations between the cook and the host, the cook speaks at length about his insights into art and academic disciplines, while the host, bored with his prattle, tries to get the cook back to the kitchen to do the waiting tasks.²⁶

Even Platina's *De honesta voluptate* contains a trace of irony or at least ambiguity in the praise it bestowed on the cook Martino de' Rossi, the original creator of Platina's recipes. To be sure, Platina wrote in a list of requirements for good cooks that they ought to be like Martino, who had taught him all the methods of food preparation. But he included the phrase "the prince of cooks of our age," which sounds in Platina's pen like a witty paradox or oxymoron, considering the social position of cooks at that time. In another chapter, he opened his praise with even more glorifying words, "Oh, immortal gods, what a cook you have brought to me. If you had heard him lecture extempore about these subjects, you would have called him another Carneades."²⁷

Famous in Rome after his lectures in 156–155 BCE, the founder and leader of the Third Academy in Athens, Carneades of Cyrene, had shown independence, critical sense, and systematic order, qualities emphasized in modern comments about Martino's talents.²⁸ But is it absolutely certain that this is the reason Platina mentioned the Greek thinker? Might it be just another of his ironic remarks? We know that Platina admired Cicero, who frequently used jokes and puns in his speeches and writings, and Platina admitted in a letter that his book had much wit and sarcasm.²⁹ The way Platina praised Martino seems a bit too exaggerated to be completely sincere, similar to when, in his 1736 poem "Le Mondain," Voltaire called a cook "un mortel divin," and when King Frederick the Great flattered his French cook Noël with these words: "He is the Newton of the cooking pot, / A real Caesar of the dripping pan."³⁰

Platina's amusing and often ironic digressions in the recipes in *De honesta voluptate* were directed to his friends in his intellectual circle. They would have understood the subtext and humor when he quipped that an elderberry pie was good for Caelius, "who is more melancholic than Saturn," or when he completed a recipe with a line not belonging to a cookbook at all: "When it is cooked, serve it to your enemies, there is nothing good in it." This last remark, coming as a comment after Martino's original recipe, does not exactly express admiration. Platina also dismissed one of Martino's recipes by calling it a silly invention, a form of nonsense typical of cooks.³¹ All this probably reveals, in my opinion, that there was a difference in attitude to humor between representatives of two social groups. This is even more evident in the way the two men described a medieval dish in which the cooked meat of a peacock is put back inside the skin and feathers and the whole bird is then put on the table to look as if it were alive. Martino wrote that

“if you want him [the peacock] to blow fire from the beak” you may put cotton and camphor soaked in aqua vitae or wine in the mouth of the bird and light it on fire.³² Platina wrote, “There are people who for fun [*ad ludum et risum*] put camphor and cotton in the mouth [of the peacock],” and so on, as in Martino.³³ It seems that Platina tried to keep his distance from such vulgar behavior; he described it from the outside, as an entertainment he would never participate in himself.

Much of this indicates that Platina intended for the book to be tongue-in-cheek, something different from his other, more academic, works. When, in the letter to Ammannati, he mentioned the use of wit and sarcasm, he added that there may be more than “foods seem to require” in the book—in other words, it contained more literary eloquence than would have been expected in the treatment of such a common subject. He also called the work “that poor little book,” which could not have been just a modest remark. Laurioux observed that Platina did not mention his cookbook in a list of what was worth remembering from his life (“ce qu’il fallait retenir de sa propre vie”).³⁴ A poem written by a contemporary bishop made fun of Platina and ridiculed the lowly subject matter of the book and the even more lowly class of people it attracted.³⁵

A LOWLY SUBJECT

Of course, descriptions of cooks in comedies cannot be taken as a general characterization of a whole group of people. These cooks are stock characters, just as protagonists in most comedies are. John Wilkins wrote of the Greek comedy cooks: “They probably reflect a special reality to some extent, but are mainly used by the comic poets to bring together the heat of the kitchen with the rhetoric and brilliance of the dining room.”³⁶ And Henisch compared the cooks in medieval comedies to the other staple characters of comedy and concluded that the depiction “has a grain or two of truth in it, but it is a likeness slanted to catch laughter, not to show truth.”³⁷

But even if these descriptions were more literary than historical, and the characters more stereotypical than typical, there is still no doubt that cooks were looked down on by the social groups represented in the audience. The practical work of cooks was outranked over and over again by more theoretical treatments of food. In a learned book from 1563, *Ars magirica* (Culinary art), which includes both gastronomic information and practical recipes, the philologist—the person who names all things—tops the list of different specialists within the arts and sciences who treat the subject of food. Then follows the scientist, who has knowledge about all animals and plants. Next comes the physician, who understands the principles of nutrition, and after him is the theologian, who knows the laws regulating diet. At the very bottom, we find the cook, who must modify his practice according to the advice of the theoreticians above him.³⁸ *Ars magirica* was written in Latin. In many ways, it is interesting that the Renaissance, when humanists were

looking back to the classical beauty of the Latin language, was also the period when the expressions *Küchenlatein* and *latino maccheronico* gained ground as terms for a Latin that was crammed with neologisms and vernacular words.³⁹

To understand the work of cooks and other artisans, it may be useful to apply the distinction Peter Burke made between two different forms of knowledge: practical, useful, and specialist knowledge, on the one hand, and theoretical, liberal, and general knowledge, on the other. The latter, known as *scientia superior*, was the knowledge of the humanists, whose background was in university studies and *artes liberales*, a system of seven disciplines elaborated in Late Antiquity that dominated thinking in the Middle Ages. *Artes mechanicae*, however, was the name given to the different forms of practical work. Even if the title gave the practical professions a certain status, they were quite clearly put on a lower level than the liberal arts of the elite, as they were not concerned with intellectual dimensions of life but only with the materialistic. Their task was to satisfy the needs of the body and create the necessities of daily life. They were consequently defined as lower and less important: *leviores, minores, inferiores*.⁴⁰

The condescending attitude toward the art of cookery—and the profession of cooks—is a recurrent theme in the history of cookbooks. It was sometimes expressed by the professionals themselves, as in the case of Domingo Hernández de Maceras, the cook at a college in Salamanca around 1600. In his introduction to *Libro del arte de cozina* (Book of culinary art), which he dedicated to a bishop, he made an apology for writing such a small book on such a lowly and humble subject, a type of excuse that was characteristic of the prefaces within this genre.⁴¹

A similar attitude toward the subject was evident when John Evelyn, a learned gardener and horticulturalist, published a book about salads in 1699. The first part was a botanical and dietetic description of different plants; the second part contained practical recipes. Evelyn was a secretary of the scientific Royal Society, and in the dedicatory letter in his book, addressed to the influential Baron Somers of Evesham, he apologized “to usher in a Trifle, with so much Magnificence.” But as a justification, he explained that this subject, “as low and despicable as it appears, challenges a part of Natural History,”⁴² which is true of the scientific section of the book. The recipe section was added as an appendix, printed in a different typeface and without pagination—in other words, it was clearly separated from the main text. Nevertheless, Evelyn excused the subject matter by noting that learned men before him, such as Plinius, Athenaeus, and Bacon, had treated the same material. And to be on the safe side, he pointed out that he had gotten the recipes from an experienced housewife. The truth was that he collected recipes himself, and some of the recipes that were printed in the salad book are more polished forms of recipes from his personal collection. It is possible that the puritan in Evelyn had problems showing interest in good food, but he also displayed a trace of contempt for the subject when he mockingly called himself a “saladmaker” and a “planter of

colewort.”⁴³ To prove how persistent this attitude to food was, at least in certain circles, it is worth mentioning a warning that the American Marion Harland, who had won a certain literary reputation for her novels, short stories, and essays, received from a critic when she published a cookbook in 1871. The critic cautioned her that whatever she wrote “after this preposterous new departure would be tainted, for the imaginative reader and reviewer, with the odor of the kitchen.”⁴⁴ This is probably also the reason for the low rank art historians through the ages have given to still life depictions of the life of the table, or as Norman Bryson put it, “the basic creaturely acts of eating and drinking.” Bryson pointed out that when academics mentioned still life in theoretical accounts of painting, “they did so disparagingly: still life was always at the bottom of the hierarchy, unworthy of the kind of superior attention reserved for history painting or the *grande manière*.”⁴⁵

COOKS WITH DIFFERENT RANKS

Professional cooks could exercise their skills in many different venues, some of which were more distinguished than others. In the Middle Ages, many of them belonged to various branches of guilds. Some had their own shops where they sold take-away food, and there were cooks who specialized in sausages, pies, sweets, or similar products. Other cooks worked in institutions, such as monasteries or hospitals. Along the roads between towns and cities, inns and stands provided food to travelers. The cooks at these establishments did not always have a good reputation. They were ridiculed in many forms of literature, and they were despised by court cooks. Marx Rumpolt, private cook at a German court, wrote in his 1581 *Ein new Kochbuch* (A new cookbook) that the remains of a certain dish should be thrown away because it “tastes of the inn” (*schmeckt nach der Herberg*). The chef Charles Carter, who worked for many English aristocrats, poured scorn on the tavern cooks. In 1730, he expressed his contempt for aristocrats who, to save money, “reject a thorough-pac’d Artist, and suffer a Raw, and perhaps Tavern-bred Dab- bler in the Science.” William Verral, who had trained under a French chef in the kitchens of the Duke of Newcastle and then became master chef of a Sussex hotel, the White Hart Inn, complained in the preface of his 1759 cookbook that he was “no more than what is vulgarly called a poor publican.”⁴⁶

In several countries, the authorities repeatedly tried to regulate the activities of the different guilds, which often quarreled among themselves over who had the right to produce and sell certain products. In 1734, Munich established a guild system that regulated competence for bakers, butchers, and the so-called *Gar-Köche*, caterers of ready-made dishes.⁴⁷ In France, different guilds prepared roasted meat dishes (*rôtisseurs*), smoked and salted foods (*charcutiers*), and pies and caser- oles (*traiteurs*). When new groups appeared in the eighteenth century trying to break down the partitions in this system and claiming the right to serve dishes

such as bouillons that were hot and nourishing (these restorative foods were called *restaurants* in French), one of the decisive steps was taken toward what would become modern restaurant culture.⁴⁸

Starting in antiquity, there were many people preparing food in all the ways described above, but from very early on, a few professional cooks stood out from the rest, known in England as chief cooks or master cooks. They headed the kitchens in princely palaces, and many of them were given honorary titles and substantial salaries. Bruno Laurioux detected a radical change—an improvement—in the social position of cooks at the end of the Middle Ages. He argued that this was partly due to a new promotion of cuisine as science or art.⁴⁹ But this promotion seems to have been ambiguous at best, and at any rate, it is valid only for a few top performers employed by princely courts. Several among them wrote cookbooks, including Guillaume Tirel (better known as Taillevent), at the court of the French King Charles VI; Bartolomeo Scappi, at the papal court in Rome; and Francisco Martínez Montaña, at the court of King Philip III in Madrid. It is quite natural that conditions for the fine art of cookery were good at a court, where there was an excellent supply of necessary victuals and interesting ingredients combined with access to the best technology of the time. But in this environment, social distinctions prevailed between the servants responsible for food. There was an intricate hierarchy with many levels and regulated duties.

Bartolomeo Stefani, cook at the court of Mantua in the seventeenth century, mentions four categories in the kitchen: *capo cuoco* (head cook), *sotto cuoco* (assistant cook), *garzone* (apprentice), and *guattero* (unqualified handyman or scullery boy). The head cook had to be a good organizer with a comprehensive view of what was needed for everything to function properly. He needed to keep an eye on the fire and make sure the utensils were clean, the cutlery was polished, and the victuals were delivered at the right time.⁵⁰ But most head chefs were under the orders of an even higher administrator. In many of the books on how banquets ought to be arranged, there is a chief steward on top, called *Hofmeister* in German, *maitre d'hôtel* in French, and *scalco* in Italian. Bartolomeo Stefani's book stated that a *maggiordomo* occupied the highest position in the house; under him was a *maestro di casa*, followed by a *scalco*, who gave orders to the head chef. At around the same time Stefani published his book, a German book, written at a monastery in Alsace in 1671, listed the responsibilities of the head chef, known in German as a *Kuchen-Meister* or *Speiss-Meister*: he needed to maintain "diligent supervision" (*fleissige Aufsicht*) over the cooks so the food was prepared correctly and served on time.⁵¹ Servants at these upper echelons were sometimes recruited from aristocratic families, but those who had managed to climb all the way up the ladder from the position of kitchen apprentice also ranked high above ordinary cooks.

Even if cooks were generally placed in the lower ranks, in certain cases a cook could acquire a special position that did not correspond to his normal place in the

hierarchy. To get an idea of how this functioned, it is worth considering the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen's observations about servants. He wrote that those activities that were by right the proper employment of the leisure class (e.g., government, fighting, hunting) were considered noble, while those that properly fell to the industrious class (e.g., handicrafts, menial services) were seen as ignoble. But he added that "a base service performed for a person of very high degree may become a very honorific office."⁵² He mentioned as examples the King's Master of the Horse and the Queen's Lady in Waiting, but in our case a suitable example might be the personal cook in princely courts in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. In France, an ordinance was enacted in 1285 that mandated the separation of the kitchen that cooked for the king and his guests from the kitchen that prepared meals for the entire staff. A 1668 Italian book about court administration included a special chapter about the private cook of the prince, who was called *il cuoco segreto*, and it was noted that this was the person who had the responsibility and the privilege of serving food to the prince himself. The book pointed out that it was common for this cook to have at his disposal a kitchen separated from the kitchen for the palace staff.⁵³ A special relationship might be established between the prince and his personal cook. The German term for this position, *Mundkoch*, directly translated as "mouth cook," is a reminder of a time when the cook had to taste all food before the prince touched it to make sure it was not poisoned. To put a more positive spin on it, the job entailed taking good care of the prince, for those who didn't might be accused of being the prince's murderer, wrote Marx Rumpolt, *Mundkoch* for the prince-elect of Mainz in the sixteenth century.⁵⁴

Some of the cooks recruited from the lower social strata were introduced to a food culture that was completely different from the one they had grown up with. They had to adapt to carry out their work in the kitchens of the wealthy. But Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, in their history of Italian cuisine, suggested the possibility that cooks acted as "key points" (*punto-chiave*) in the exchange between two different cultures. They brought their own food cultures with them to court, modified the dishes according to the demands of this new setting, and then brought the resulting products back with them to their own social environment.⁵⁵

WOMEN AND PROFESSIONAL COOKING

The cooks described in this chapter have been exclusively men, although women are in an absolute majority as cooks throughout the history of mankind. Their work has not been thought of as a profession, however, because most women have carried out daily cooking in the home. But starting in the Middle Ages, women were employed as cooks in inns and institutions, and they also privately produced food for sale. This work sometimes violated the rules of the guilds, which often restricted women because they lacked the recognized skills and qualifications men

had.⁵⁶ The French guilds, which were abolished in 1791, required both masters and apprentices to be male.⁵⁷ For hundreds of years, women also worked as cooks and household servants in families that could not afford to pay for male cooks. The aristocracy normally preferred male cooks, but more and more female cooks were employed in wealthy families during the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ This became the rule in bourgeois households, which employed fewer servants, but these female cooks had less prestige than cooks in palaces and mansions. Generally, female cooks also received smaller salaries than male cooks. In France, it was reported that male cooks earned up to three times as much as their female counterparts.⁵⁹

Following the great social transformations of the nineteenth century, particularly in northern Europe, women cooks became increasingly common in ordinary middle-class families, where they often combined cooking with other household tasks—if the housewife did not cook herself (figure 2). Many of these cooks had not been properly prepared for their work. Eliza Acton stated in her 1855 cookbook that very few cooks are “really trained to a knowledge of their duties,” and she therefore welcomed “the establishment of well-conducted schools for the early and efficient training of our female domestic servants.”⁶⁰

Cooking schools go back a long time, particularly in England and Scotland, but the modern form of education that includes cooking as part of “domestic science” or “household economy” emerged in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, this education was not oriented exclusively to domestic servants but also to young women who would become housewives with a responsibility for cooking themselves. This was quite a different situation compared with that of a lady who only supervised the household’s cook or even simply let an appointed housekeeper take care of that task.

Historically, men have often referred to female cooks with little respect. When the successful eighteenth-century French cookbook writer Menon, after publishing a series of great works for the professional chefs of the aristocracy, was persuaded to write a book for female cooks in bourgeois households, *La cuisinière bourgeoise*, he demonstrated a rather patronizing attitude by giving easy recipes for simple dishes.⁶¹ The German gourmet writer Karl von Rumohr was full of contempt in his 1822 description of female cooks, who, in his opinion, lacked the necessary thoroughness for the trade, had a penchant for fashion and decoration, and demonstrated unyielding resistance to his many good suggestions for improvements.⁶² The folklorist and amateur cook P. Chr. Asbjørnsen was just as merciless in 1859 when scolding Norwegian housewives, who, according to him, did not have the required knowledge about the new and scientifically based cookery that he had picked up from German cooks who followed the nutritional ideas of the chemist Justus von Liebig.⁶³

When women enrolled in professional cookery courses in France in the later years of the nineteenth century, one male specialist had an indignant and choleric reaction and accused the women of usurping a profession that did not belong to



FIGURE 2. Title page of *Nyeste og fuldstændigste kogebog* (The newest and most complete cookbook), published in the Norwegian capital, Kristiania (present-day Oslo), in 1894. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most middle-class families had a maid, who also served as cook if the housewife did not prepare the food herself.

them. He was aware that women were immersed in cooking from birth and had no objection to women who made traditional dishes at home, but he claimed that they had no right to enter what he called “our work,” which he considered too fatiguing for the female constitution and also too extensive for their flimsy knowledge. “The result will in any case be nothing more than a deficient, I will even say a bad, imitation,” he asserted.⁶⁴ These are exactly the same arguments that have always been made when women have tried to enter new arenas previously reserved for men.

In turn, women expressed strong criticism of male cooks, accusing them of being spendthrifts with no concern for health. This was a topic in many English books of the eighteenth century that discussed the value of French cooks. In Italy, the first cookbook written by an Italian woman, published in 1900, claimed that male cooks had no care for the stomach or the purse of the person who paid him: “For [the male cooks] it is enough to pose as artist, these cooks are seeking a name for themselves, and they want glory and laurels, even at the risk of spoiling other people’s digestion.” She wrote that they cooked for the epicures and the gluttons rich enough to pay, while the female cooks were satisfied if the food was healthy, tasty, and did not cost “a mint of money” (*un occhio della testa*).⁶⁵ In the early twentieth century, the German Mary Hahn compared the male cook to a general (*Feldherr*) who was not afraid of spending and waste, whereas “the housewife to her kitchen herd is as the mother hen who carefully selects the best morsels and grains for her fledglings and makes sure that nothing is wasted.”⁶⁶ It took a long time for female restaurant and hotel cooks to become firmly established, and they remain a minority in the profession even today. A few pioneers have had great influence. Eugénie (“Mère”) Brazier, for example, received three Michelin stars in 1933 and took in Paul Bocuse as a young commis in 1946. But very few women have participated in the Bocuse d’Or—the world’s most prestigious culinary competition—and among the forty-eight medalists between 1987 and 2015, there is only one female chef.

COOKS, SERVANTS, AND PATRONS

The big differences between rich and poor cooks and between famous celebrities and unknown toilers cannot hide the fact that most cooks were, until recently, servants. Even the cooks with lofty reputations and many privileges had a duty: to serve their masters, their princes, or their patrons. A Polish cookbook from 1682 made clear that the job of the cook was to understand his master’s intentions when preparing a banquet and to make sure the food was served at the right time so that his master would not get worked up. In his list of qualifications for a cook, he added the word *pokorny*, which means “humble” or “submissive.” The Italian chief steward Giovanni Battista Rossetti wrote in 1584 that the most important quality in a cook was fidelity and reliability, and as late as 1801, the cook was hailed by the French poet Joseph Berchoux as “a faithful servant” (*un serviteur fidèle*).⁶⁷

Most important of all for the cook was to honor and respect the taste of his patron, a view expressed as early as antiquity, when, in one of his epigrams, Martial said that he didn't want to accommodate his palate to that of his cook; a cook ought to have the same taste as his patron ("domini debet habere gulam").⁶⁸ Martino repeatedly stressed that the taste of his patron was what decided the amount of spices and other details in his cooking. The same attitude can be found in many cookbooks and works written about the household. The author of the late fifteenth-century manuscript *Cuoco napoletano* expressed explicitly that a cook had to be a glutton (*ghiotto*), not for himself, but for his *patrone*.⁶⁹ Bartolomeo Scappi, private cook at the papal court in the sixteenth century, often stressed in his writings that a cook must take taste into consideration, not his own taste or some neutral palate but rather the personal taste of whoever had ordered the meal.⁷⁰ Several hundred years later, in 1853, the Milanese cook Giovanni Felice Luraschi wrote almost the same thing: a cook must have a good palate in order to study the taste of his master because "the cook must have the same palate as his master."⁷¹ A German chef went as far as saying that the taste of the master must be holy (*heilig*) for the cook and that the cook must not be permitted to act against it.⁷² Even those cooks who worked as freelancers and were admired for their art had to follow guidelines from their employers.⁷³

To get a better understanding of the relationship between the cook and the patron, it is worthwhile to compare cooks to another group of servants: artists. Artists were often treated as working men. As Johan Huizinga pointed out in his study of forms of life, thought, and art in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, all art during this period was more or less applied art, and therefore the distinction between free visual art (*vrij beeldende kunst*) and handicraft (*kunsthandwerk*) was in practice wiped out, and consequently there was no difference between artists and craftsmen. Huizinga gave several examples of great court painters who colored chairs, painted shields, and repaired mechanical apparatuses.⁷⁴ In Florence, Botticelli had to paint wedding chests and banners. In Ferrara, most painters were paid per day or by surface area, a master potter earned more than a sculptor, and a tapestry weaver or a skilled tailor could earn four times as much as an architect. In Spain, King Philip IV put Velázquez on the payroll as an upholsterer. In Peter Burke's words: "Renaissance artists generally did more or less what they were told. The constraints on them are part of their history."⁷⁵

With examples covering hundreds of painters, sculptors, and others, Burke demonstrated that the attitude the elite had toward artists varied: "Three social prejudices against artists retained their power in this period [the Renaissance]. Artists were considered ignoble because their work involved manual labor, because it involved retail trade [just like cobblers and traders] and because they lacked learning [they were trained in guilds and not at universities]."⁷⁶

The situation began to change during the sixteenth century, when the Italian art critic Giorgio Vasari began to distinguish between "craft" and "art," especially

painting, sculpture, and architecture. In his analysis of Italian courts in sixteenth century Italy, Guido Guerzoni wrote, “It should be remembered that the debate on the alleged superiority of certain expressive genres (such as painting) over other arts was late in developing and limited to specific intellectual circles. It became more generally accepted from the late 1570s in Ferrara.”⁷⁷ But Italy was perhaps more advanced in this respect than other parts of Europe. In a 1506 letter to the German humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, the painter Albrecht Dürer wrote about his positive experience in Italy: “Here I am a gentleman, at home a sponger” (Hie bin ich ein Herr, doheim ein Schmarotzer).⁷⁸

When artists worked in courts rather than within guilds or in workshops, they were often better paid and able to obtain a higher status. Some of them were even knighted in their old age, just like certain Italian cooks and *scalcos*. But this improved status did not immediately lead to artistic independence. The main task of artists was to entertain the prince, and this was not so different from that of other servants, such as cooks.

The sociologist Norbert Elias described the situation at a court where Mozart’s father was employed as a musician in the eighteenth century, and he equated the rank and status of musicians in a princely household with that of cooks and confectioners (*Zuckerbäcker*).⁷⁹ In an indignant letter to his father in 1781, Amadeus himself complained about the bad treatment he received at the court of the archbishop in Salzburg. At dinner, he was seated with the servants, among them the cooks (“bej die herrn köche”).⁸⁰ But he was not the only one who suffered such humiliation. Great artists such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Joseph Haydn were kept on a tight leash by their protectors. Haydn grumblingly wrote to his friend Marianne von Genzinger that he didn’t know if he was “Capellmeister oder Capell-diener” (music director or music servant). According to the cultural historian Tim Blanning “the dependent culture fostered by the representational worlds of the courts could bring security, wealth, and even status, but it also involved subservience to the patron, whether individual or institutional.”⁸¹

From the later part of the eighteenth century, a bourgeois public sphere emerged, leading to the gradual liberation and independence of artists. In his well-known analysis of the transformation of the public sphere, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas pointed out that in the case of music, performance was no longer exclusively something that took place at courts and churches, with their appointed composers and musicians. People paid for admission to concerts, and music became a commodity, but at the same time, music became *zweckfrei*—not tied to a purpose. The earlier *Gebrauchsmusik*—music for special occasions—was replaced by music chosen according to what one preferred.⁸²

If we try to apply Habermas’s ideas to the art of cooking, we can easily imagine that restaurants—public dining rooms—which appeared more or less at the same time as public concerts, represented the emergence of a new bourgeois public for

gastronomy. Gourmet food became a commodity people could buy and not only a part of the representation and self-presentation of the courts. But if this comparison is valid for the change of audience—the guests—it is more doubtful that it applies to the culinary artists.

There was indeed a growing esteem for some of the most successful new restaurateurs in Paris in the early nineteenth century. This was partly due to the fact that in the new restaurant culture, competition, and consequently reputation, became important. The historian Jean-Paul Aron, a specialist on French “eating culture” in the nineteenth century, considered chefs to be different from employees in the general meaning of the word. Chefs were practitioners and artists, and they had the same aim as restaurant owners; some of them even owned their own restaurants. And they commanded a brigade.⁸³ But this was not necessarily true for all cooks in all European countries. One of the Parisian restaurateurs, Antoine Beauvilliers, who owned a tavern before the French Revolution, summarized his experiences in 1814 and claimed that Spanish gastronomy had seen little progress as a result of the general contempt toward people who prepared food for others—in other words, cooks. His statement clearly implied that this was not the case in France.⁸⁴ This is in line with what the British writer Launcelot Sturgeon claimed a few years later: “Whatever may be the praises bestowed on a dinner, the host never thinks of declaring the name of the artist who produced it; and while half the great men in London owe their estimation in society to the excellence of their tables, the cooks on whose talents they have risen, languish ‘unknown to fame’ in those subterraneous dungeons of the metropolis termed kitchens. In France, on the contrary, a man’s cook is his pride.”⁸⁵

This was in 1822, and there seems indeed to have been a certain development in the valuation of cooks in France over the course of the Napoleonic period and the Bourbon Restoration. This development can be traced in texts by the French writer Grimod de la Reynière. In 1803, in the preface to the first volume of his *Almanach des gourmands*, Grimod explained how the journal would be important for gourmands with ignorant cooks who didn’t know how to make good food with little money. The next year, in the second volume, he contended that it was not enough for a host to have a lot of money and a good cook, claiming that he would never be able to eat and dine well if he depended only on his servants. Contrary to what Sturgeon would write fifteen years later, Grimod regretted—in the 1807 edition of the *Almanach*—that the name of the cook was too often unknown to the guests at a dinner.⁸⁶ In his handbook for hosts, *Manuel des amphitryons*, published in 1808, Grimod wrote that although the cook ought to present suggestions for the menu each day, it was the host who made the decisions, and he might often give a very capable cook the most brilliant ideas.⁸⁷ But then, in the 1812 edition of his *Almanach*, he observed that chefs had acquired a greater importance, noting that hosts had started to work with their cooks in the same way princes worked with their

ministers. The cooks were no longer only chefs, they had become true artists, and in this process, they had acquired more respect and a higher salary.⁸⁸ But, as their salaries indicated, they were after all still servants.

If a few of the great gourmets understood the creativity and originality of culinary chefs in early nineteenth-century Paris, cooks in general did not enjoy more respect from the public. In 1821, the playwright Eugène Scribe made theater audiences laugh when he presented the comedy *Le secrétaire et le cuisinier*, which was about a secretary and a cook starting new jobs in a big mansion. The employer mistakes one for the other, and the comical effect is created by the contrast between conversations belonging to two very different spheres, similar to the method used in Greek comedies from antiquity. And in order to further underline how the cook was perceived, Scribe gave him the ridiculous name Soufflé, a word that is not only a culinary term but also means “inflated,” as in “pompous.”

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an exclusive group of French cooks became famous, and many of them had successful careers abroad. But this did not mean that they achieved the same independence as artists. Their job was to serve food that satisfied the expectations of the guests. Cooks who tried to break away by making their own experiments risked running into problems. The French-born cook Alexis Soyer made his career in Victorian England, where he was honored by princes and gourmets, but he quit his assignment as chef in London’s Reform Club because—at least as he explained it—he disagreed with certain plans the management wished to implement. He gained fame for his books, his charitable work, his technical inventions, and his culinary genius. But although the writer George Augustus Sala declared at Soyer’s funeral in 1858, “He was my dear and good friend,” he prefaced this by saying, “He was but a Cook.” This was the same expression Helen Morris used in her biography of Soyer eighty years later: “He was only a cook.” And in 1860, Soyer himself wrote with a certain bitterness that “cookery, in our era, has been thought beneath the attention of men of science” and that a cook was “in the opinion of almost every one, a mere menial.”⁸⁹

During the nineteenth century, there are numerous examples from France of how the status of cooks remained low, as expressed in the book *Hygiène alimentaire* (Food hygiene), published in 1868 by the physician Auguste Debay: “In France as in most civilized nations cooking is exclusively a task for women and for men from a lower social class and without education.”⁹⁰ Even the great French cook Auguste Escoffier, the innovator of international hotel cuisine, said that when he started as an apprentice in 1859, the profession of cooks had very low esteem in high society.⁹¹ When, at the end of his career, in 1928, he became an Officier in the Légion d’honneur, he was the first cook in French history to receive this mark of distinction.

In the first half of the twentieth century, great cooks established themselves in restaurants in France and became an inspiration for the generation of chefs in the