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Brillat-Savarin

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Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826)

"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are"

(free translation after Brillat-Savarin, aphorism no. IV (Brillat-Savarin (1986):22).

Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin was born in Belley, France in 1755 and was the older brother of seven sisters and brothers. He was born with the family name 'Brillat', but later added the name Savarin, when an aunt left her fortune to him on the condition that he would take on her name. Early in his life he gained a great interest in food – undoubtedly under influence by his mother, Aurore, who was a talented cordon bleu chef and influenced by the strong traditions of the regional kitchen of the area.



Drawing by Bertall
(Brillat-Savarin (1986):444)

References/Further reading

Brillat-Savarin followed in his family's footsteps regarding his career, when he went to study law in Dijon. The only thing that links to his later accomplishments in the gastronomical world is the fact that he did additional studies in basic chemistry and medicine in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Brillat-Savarin operated as both judge and politician during his lifetime – a period in which great changes took place politically and the absolute monarchy was threatened. Brillat-Savarin installed himself as a province solicitor in his home city, was later elected deputy of the National Assembly, president of the civil court at Ain and mayor and commander of the National Guard. During the French Revolution he was forced into exile, when the new regime issued a summoning against him. He fled

Litterature:

Fakstorp, Jørgen m.fl. (1998): Gastronomisk leksikon, København

Brillat-Savarin, J.A.(1986): Smagens Fysiologi, Haslev

Birch, J. m.fl. (2001): Larousse Gastronomique, New York

Despite this hotchpotch of accuracy and storytelling, or maybe even because of this, Brillat-Savarin's book has been reissued time and time again. Today great parts of the book are rather questionable, if viewed as an informed source, but what the book lacks in historical accuracy, it regains when viewed as a portrait of that time.

Brillat-Savarin's name has been given to a number of dishes and garnishes. As an example a "garnish made of salpicon of foie gras and truffles" which "may be placed in small tarts or in shells of duchess potatoes to be served with gane or noisettes of lamb, or may be used as filling for an omelette." (Birch m.fl.(2001):168) can be mentioned.

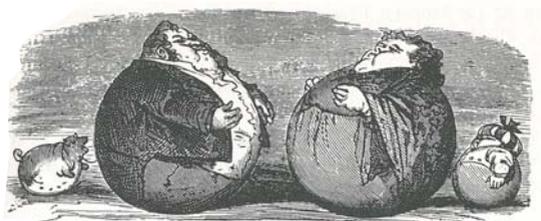
for Switzerland, then Holland and from there to the United States, where he stayed for three years and occupied himself as a French teacher and as a violinist in a theater orchestra in New York. His exile gave him the opportunity to make new gastronomic discoveries with hearty appetite – for instance roast turkey, pot-roast goose, corned beef – but with his exile he was listed as an emigrant, synonymously labeled as a national traitor, which is why he lost all his possessions, not least a vineyard. He returned to France in 1797 – he was granted permission to return as a result of political changes. After his homecoming he took up different odd jobs, but finally he was appointed councilor to the Supreme Court of Appeal. A position he held until his death.

He never married, though he is said to deeply appreciate female charm and to have adored the married Madame Récamier. In his later works, he makes reference to her. As a bachelor he dedicated himself to his areas of interest, including archeology, astronomy and chemistry – but foremost the discipline of living the good life with gastronomy being his great passion. He frequented the restaurants of Paris and particularly Grand Véfour, Véry, Beauvilliers and Torini held a special place in his gastronomic heart. In his home he also cooked specialties himself, which were served for a selected circle of like-minded people;



As described, Brillat-Savarin treats gastronomy as science, a ground-breaking approach at the time. But at the same time it becomes evident that he has great abilities as a storyteller and the book is perforated by personal anecdotes, gastronomical poems and humorous features. He shows a great tendency towards exaggeration and do not try to cover his own greed in connection with food, but enhances it as a true virtue:

"Greed is a passionate, reasoned and habitual preference for those objects which flatter taste."
(Brillat Savarin in (Birch m.fl.(2001):168))



Drawing by Bertall
(Brillat-Savarin (1986):327)



From the chapter "The senses in Action" - Drawing by Bertall
(Brillat-Savarin (1986):43)

“A person who organizes a feast for his friends without showing the meal, which is to be placed on the table in front of them, the lesser the interest and care, the less the person deserves to have friends at all.”

(free translation after Brillat-Savarin, aphorism no. XVIII (Brillat-Savarin, 1986:24).

Examples of the dishes he prepared himself are: tuna omelette, stuffed pheasant garnished with oranges and fillet of beef with truffles.

December the 8th 1825 his great work of literature was published; “*Physiologie du gout*” (The physiology of taste), a book which was about to make him famous and ensure him his place in the history of gastronomy.

work of Grimod de La Reynière. Though successful in general, the book gave rise to enthusiasm as well as envy and disdain – the latter was the case for the master chef Caramè. Caramè declares:

“They both [Brillat-Savarin and Cambacérès] favored powerful and simple things and simply filled their stomachs” ...“Mr. Savarin was an ill-mannered man. When he had eaten he surrendered himself completely to digestion.”

(free translation after preface by Hans Jørgen Nielsen (Brillat-Savarin 1986:17)

Caramè here accuses Brillat-Savarin of being not a gourmet, but a gourmand (obsessed with eating, especially good, food) – a very serious accusation in those circles.

the quality of the culinary field and reflections concerning the field became an issue that appealed to a wider audience. This is the background for the emergence and spreading of the word gastronomy. In 1801 it appeared for the first time. Brillat-Savarin brought it up again and played a significant role in defining its full modern meaning as a label for the reflected pleasure of the culinary art and the reasoned talk about this pleasure.

Besides developing the 'gastronomy', it was the innovative ambition of Brillat-Savarin to turn the culinary art into an area of science and philosophy, introducing an approach based on chemistry, physics, medicine and anatomy. In this way his work differed greatly from that of others, including the



Drawing by Bertall
(Brillat-Savarin (1986):255)

Ironically his fate was to not live to experience this fame, as he died two months prior to the release. It was a culinary educational book, which contained few recipes but many observations covering all aspects of the meal. It was not a given case that the book would be this successful. Brillat-Savarin invested much time in writing tirelessly; he made his passion the object of far-reaching reflections. He funded the first anonymous publication personally, but this edition did not cause any stir. After the death of the gastronome, an heir had to sell the remaining copies at bargain price. But after some time the reputation of the book started to spread and received cult status, and the identity of the author became known to people outside his circle of friends.

Until now the literate audience had only seen smaller legal and economical works and a single essay from his hands.

At that time the notion of gastronomy was in its infancy. It was something new and fashionable. Brillat-Savarin writes:

“The word gastronomy will be sufficient in order to make everybody prick up their ears; the subject is as relevant as possible”.

(free translation after (Brillat-Savarin 1986:10)

It was not until 1835 that the word was officially accepted into the French language. It is clear that there existed a French cuisine before these days and what we today would call gastronomical works of literature. But in the time of Brillat-Savarin