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Good Taste(s) and Hard Work

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Abstract

The *Gourmands' Almanac* [*Almanach des Gourmands*, 1803-12] by the Frenchman Grimod de la Reynière (1758-1837) is one of the first modern European restaurant guides. Its stated aim was to teach individuals enriched by the French Revolution how to enjoy their new-found wealth at the table. Grimod has long been an icon for gastronomic hedonism, and his *Almanac* is generally tagged as a guide to procuring culinary pleasures. But the *Almanac's* publication also served its author in a practical fashion. While Grimod had been a wealthy amphitryon or host before the Revolution, a "change in fortunes" forced him to work for a living thereafter. The steady stream of comestibles submitted to Grimod by the caterers and restaurateurs of Paris in exchange for publicity in the *Almanac*, provided the author with the proverbial and much needed free lunch.

In time, the exchange of food items for publicity proved less than ideal for the self-appointed arbiter of good taste(s). As the mountain of food items submitted to Grimod's consideration grew ever larger, and as publication deadlines loomed, Grimod found himself transformed into a human "food processor" whose troubles ranged from indigestion to ennui. Pleasure morphed into work as the Ancien Régime amphitryon obliged to earn a living in the New France of Napoleon's Empire struggled to keep pace with the demands of his own commercial enterprise.

The tension between pleasure and work that lies at the heart of the founding text of French gastronomic writing, was produced by a unique set of personal and historical circumstances. Yet this literary-historical narrative suggests questions pertinent to today's – and tomorrow's – eaters and cooks. Cooking and even eating may be burdensome chores, or the most relaxing, restoring, or expressive of activities. Where does one draw the line between pleasure and work for the eater and the cook? What causes that line to shift?

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