

Woo in Review: A REVOLUTION IN TASTE and THE ORDER OF THINGS

Written by Alison Smith

Sunday, 07 December 2008 00:25

Woo in Review

A REVOLUTION IN TASTE: THE RISE OF FRENCH CUISINE by Susan Pinkard and

THE ORDER OF THINGS: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES by Michel Foucault



First of all, let me start off by apologizing for the lack of Woo in Review this past week. I was supposed to have a telephone interview with [James van Praagh](#) about his work on [Ghost Whisperer](#), and (after his assistant agreed to the interview) either he realized who I am or he is a total flake. So that means no *Ghost Whisperer*, which I'm definitely sad about as I must now shelve the dozen jokes I have collected about [Jennifer Love Hewitt's](#) cleavage and how shocking it is that none of the other characters have yet suffocated to death in it as, for all appearances, it seems to take up at least 95% of the set. Aha, got one in anyway. Ba-dum-tish.

Instead I found myself interested in the book *A Revolution in Taste* by Dr. Susan Pinkard, who

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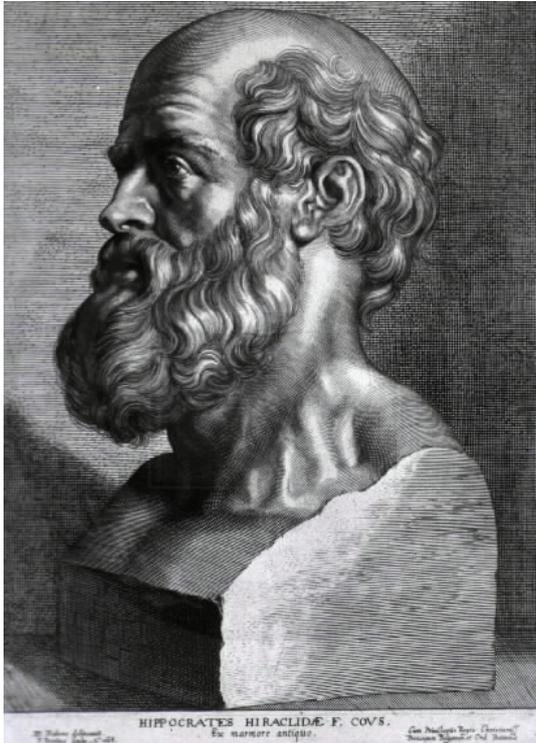
is an expert in European history and an assistant professor at [Georgetown](#)

A Revolution in Taste

combines two of Pinkard's great loves – European history and cooking.

The book investigates the shift from cooking with Hippocratic origins to French cooking, full of butter and taste and variance in flavor.

I should admit, though, that reading Pinkard's book is a bit like reading a transcript of someone playing [Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon](#) . If you pick up this book, prepare for a lot of lists. A whole lot of lists. Lists so long that, at the end, you will be wondering what was being listed in the first place because it was four pages back and you honestly can't remember. And before I give this review, and yes, it's insane that I haven't actually started it yet, I should also say: If you can make it to the end of this book, there is a hopeful message for skepticism to be found. If you can't, don't worry, I'll tell you what it is at the end of this.



According to Pinkard, European cooking had [Hippocratic](#) origins. The entire section devoted to this fact is rather disgusting, as foods that I would never consider putting in my mouth are described in vast detail. Ancient modes of cooking were utilized to fuse the flavors of a dish so completely that it was hard to guess what the individual components were – either by

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appearance or taste. When I imagine this, I imagine eating a sauce-covered hunk of unidentifiable meat with unidentifiable vegetables surrounding it. Ew gross.

And, also according to Pinkard, the desire to make mushy grossfoods was buttressed by the belief that a balance in the four vital fluids, which corresponded with the four elements, was necessary for a balanced human constitution. If one could create some kind of [homeostasis](#) through foods, they would never get sick. This was referred to as [Hippocratic dietetics](#)

Now, the 'vital fluids' part sounds innocuous enough, but I had been previously unaware what they were. They are blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. In order to balance these fluids, one had to eat foods that were dry, hot, moist, or cold (and there was an actual sort of chart for these things which was vaguely reminiscent of [Mohs scale](#)) depending upon how they felt. I can just imagine a restaurant catering to these needs. ("Yes, clearly you need something with more phlegm.")

As a less revolting example, during the wet winter months, one might eat dry foods to combat the potential of a cold.

Funnily enough, one of the foods that was used to combat colds was garlic soup, which was made from (as one might imagine) tons of garlic mixed with a little water. [Oddly, the belief in the power of garlic to prevent/cure colds is still around](#)

. It is true that garlic is an antibiotic, though that would have no effect on a cold (which is a viral illness, and not even just one but hundreds).



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As a side note, it's kind of interesting to look at how mythology lines up with medicine before we had the knowledge needed to realize why things were working. The vampire myth, which could well have real roots in disease, contains garlic – an antibiotic. Stories of witches contain salt – an antiseptic. Stories of werewolves have silver – an antifungal and antibiotic.

Strangely, the most balanced substance one could consume according to Hippocratic dietetics (and the only one at the center of the graph) is milk. Which leads me straight back to Jennifer Love Hewitt's cleavage. (Ba-dum-tish again.)

Hippocratic dietetics kept its fingernails in cooking for quite some time. (That's disgusting imagery, sorry.) By 1300, the purpose of each course of a meal was to "promote good digestion." At this point, however, it was understood that human constitution was "wholly inherited from one's ancestors."

But, according to Pinkard, there was a very definite shift that seemed to coincide with advances in medicine made by [Andreas Vesalius](#), who, in 1543, published [De Humani Corporis Fabrica](#), a book on human anatomy that illustrated the misconceptions of the Greek physicians.

Hippocratic dietetics no longer had a place with the more comprehensive understanding of the human body available to the public, and by the early 1650s, new guides to the culinary arts were being published that put emphasis on food for flavor and the natural taste and complements of meals. This was called 'delicate cuisine.'

Curative applications for dining were not reintroduced until around 1720, when [George Cheyne](#) suggested that a diet involving moderation of various foods could treat and possibly even cure illnesses.

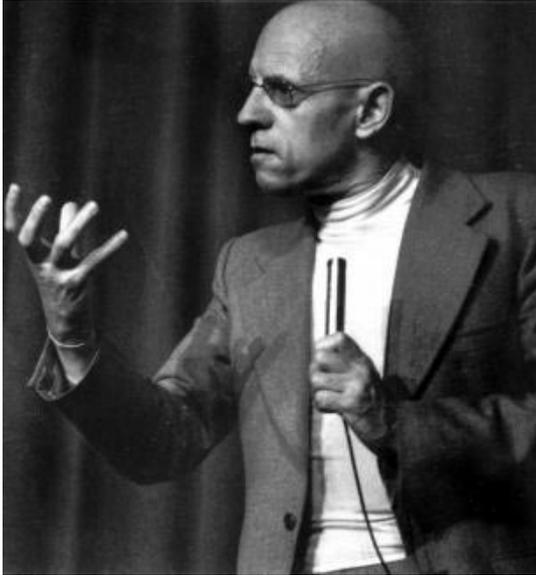
I am leaving out quite a bit of the book, of course, and if you are interested in table seating and the history of saffron, boy do I have a book recommendation for you. If you can, that is, stand seeing the phrase "It is interesting to note," followed, repeatedly, by something completely uninteresting.

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While reading this book, I kept thinking, "This all feels very familiar..." and realized I was remembering the work of another historian, [Michel Foucault](#) .



Foucault was a French historian, sociological researcher, and philosopher; and one of his most famous books is [The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences](#) .

The Order of Things was also heavily concerned with the mid-seventeenth century which, you may have noticed, is part of the period of time called [The Renaissance](#) . Great cultural changes took place. More emphasis was put on the arts. Etc, etc. Pretend I inserted a big historical paragraph here.

Foucault believed that human history could be divided into particular eras by [epistemes](#) (the 'ways of knowing') that were widely held at the time. Forgetting for the moment any conclusions that Foucault drew from his observations (since he is associated with post-modernism and that might irritate someone), let's take a look at what he saw.

Imagine that there is a table. On this table are a lot of objects. A button, an umbrella, a baby doll, a lightbulb, a lizard, a baseball bat, and a set of toenail clippers.

According to Foucault, before the Renaissance, an individual who was presented with such a table and asked to arrange the objects would do so in a way that showed an imagined

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relationship of the objects to one another. For instance, if five of the objects were orange, they would all go together. The toenail clippers and the baseball bat and the umbrella might go together since they are all things humans use. The task would be infinite, and in the (never)end perhaps the best categorization would simply be "all the objects are on the table." There is no 'right' way to classify them. They don't actually have a relationship. But in pre-Renaissance thinking, everything had a relationship. Every item in the universe had a designation as one of the four elements; and these were all always working together and counterbalancing one another.

During the Renaissance, there was a shift of thinking that caused objects to be examined for their own attributes within a particular category – so that in the mid-seventeen hundreds, botanist [Carolus Linnaeus](#) established botanical taxonomy to identify plants with polynomial Latin names that both showed the relationships of plants to one another and defined them as a particular species. Only items that had real relationships were categorized together during this period, so that an individual could describe a butterfly as an insect, knowing all the while that an insect is not necessarily a butterfly. (Noticing, as well, that [the term 'insect' didn't exist until 1601](#) .)

Foucault illustrates this epistemological shift using the example of [Don Quixote](#) , the titular character in *Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* EI by Miguel Cervantes, which was published in 1604. Foucault posits that Quixote was not an "insane person," but was rather an individual caught between two different periods of thought. For instance, Quixote wore a barber's basin on his head as a hat and believed that a prostitute was really a damsel in distress in need of saving. In other words, his world had shifted from being a place that was concerned with similarity (such that a barber's basin would seem comparable to a knight's helmet) to one concerned with difference (where you'd look like an idiot with a bowl on your head).

If you apply the same epistemological theory to Pinkard's book, then the gross mushfoods make sense – Hippocratic dietetics were concerned with balancing a meal; making sure that all the parts worked together to bring equilibrium to the human constitution. The table which held a medieval meal was composed of opposing things which were assumed to have a likeness so long as they were in relation to one another. And this could be anything. Every item of food was measured on a scale of only four attributes. And none of those was flavor. It would have been permissible to wear a barber's bowl to the dinner table.

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Then, at the same time Foucault noted the shift from likenesses to differences, European cooking went from balancing a person's constitution with a meal of one homogeneous lump to enhancing and complementing different flavors – identifying the components of a good meal by what the ingredients were specifically.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that Foucault talks about Hippocratic dietetics in his own work, [*Power, Ethics, and Knowledge*](#)

Of course, these are all just theories on what caused the changes during the Renaissance. Whether or not you're on board with any of them is up to you. Both books listed here cover similar ground – the shift of thinking of the Renaissance. They just take different angles. Both are difficult reads. However, Foucault covers a broader range, uses more examples, and though his writing may be more dense, reading *The Order of Things* is far more rewarding than reading what, in essence, is nothing more than a series of recipes with philosophical conjecture thrown in.

But if you want one of those recipes, here's one for "a harmless salad" dressing by Apicius, a man who compiled recipes in ancient Rome.

Keep in mind that taste was not big here, and the intention was to balance the cold, wet qualities of lettuce.

2 ounces ginger

1 ounce green rue

1 ounce meaty dates

12 scruples of ground pepper

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1 ounce good honey

8 ounces Aethiopian or Syrian cumin

I can feel my constitution balancing already.

And here is the message on skepticism that I mentioned earlier:

Imagine a world where you believe completely in the four vital fluids described by Hippocrates. You believe Hippocrates so much that your meals consist of disgusting foods that are more like medicine than dining. Everyone around you believes the same thing you do; that you are magically balancing your phlegm or something.

Then, in 1543, Vesalius publishes his book on human anatomy and suddenly everything changes. In just over a century, a way of life adopted from ancient times and followed for thousands of years was completely displaced. The opinions of the public about-faced. Completely.

Isn't that reassuring? Imagine how cool it would be if all our work against the paranormal resulted in the same thing.

[A REVOLUTION IN TASTE](#) by Susan Pinkard : 3 out of 5 stars.

[THE ORDER OF THINGS](#) by Michel Foucault: 4 out of 5 stars.