1. Opening Times

Through Chicago, through the crowds, Frances is walking. She’s looking for a job as a waitress. The streetcars are screeching, a police officer’s whistle is ringing, the Chicago L is thundering in her ears. She’s thirty-seven, and actually a teacher. She started out in a village school with only one classroom. That was near St. Clair in Michigan, out by the Canadian border. She has lived in suburban Detroit, in suburban Chicago, then in Great Falls, Montana, famous for its waterfalls. She married William and stopped teaching. Then the economy in Great Falls collapsed. They moved to Chicago. And William fell terminally ill. In a worn-out black dress, Frances struggles to edge her way through the crowd and into dark, narrow Van Buren Street. She saw an employment ad in the Chicago Daily News. Now she’s standing in front of the restaurant. Through the windows she watches the bright, set up tables, leisurely eating men and women, girls in white aprons with dishes in their hands. Frances is unsure. Should she go in or not? Her heart is beating so fast, she will write later, that she almost can’t breathe. But then she steps inside and asks the man behind the cigar counter whether they needed a waitress here. Yes, he says. They did. But they had hired someone.
yesterday. Alright, Frances says. She flees back onto the street, into the noise of 1917.¹

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The capital is famous for its restaurants. Fish and seafood are excellent here, as are beef, poultry and pasta. The choices of products are manifold, because the establishments are not only looking to satisfy long-established city dwellers, but also the war refugees who have been living here for quite some time. Their traditions and dietary rules - such as those of the Muslims - enrich the cuisine's diversity. The sweet soy soup at the market is recommendable. The fish soup and the mutton at Mother Song's are very good. There's pork cooked in ash in front of the Longevity-and-Compassion Palace. The boiled pork from Wei-the-Big-Knife at the Cat Bridge is excellent, and the honey fritters from Zhou-Number Five in front of the Five-span Pavilion are quite delicious, a gourmet reports. He's writing in 1275 about the impressive gastro-scene in Hangzhou, the Chinese capital during the Song dynasty.²

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The history of the European restaurant starts with the fact that people aren't hungry. Or pretend not to be. In Paris, excessive feasting in a tavern, an inn, isn't in keeping with the elitist zeitgeist of the time around 1760. Those who think themselves genteel are sensitive. They can't stomach much, so they eat very little but take a long time to do so. The elegant clientele is drawn to luxuriously furnished taverns of a new type. There are wide mirrors on the walls, in which you can admire yourself and others. The »restorative« bouillons, that lend their name to these new eating establishments, are steaming in decorative porcelain bowls. The poultry-, venison- or veal-based broths are supposed to bring those back to strength who are too sensitive for other foods.
But it's not the bouillons that make the success of the restaurant; it's the focus on the individual and their wishes. Unlike in a tavern, the customers don't have to sit at a long table with all sorts of strangers. They receive their own table. They can choose at what time of day they are being served. They select from a menu. After the revolution, members of the national assembly come to Paris from all the provinces. They go out to restaurants for a meal together. The Parisians imitate them. And soon restaurants open that carry the same new fashionable name, but are more affordable and less noble than the prototypes. During the revolutionary age, the guild system becomes less rigid. Restaurateurs have more liberties to fulfill sophisticated wishes for their guests. And from the beginning, the service is of immense importance for the success of a restaurant. At least it is according to Diderot, philosopher of the Enlightenment. In 1767, he praised the bouillon and the iced water as well as the beautiful restauratrice after visiting such an establishment.

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After the rejection, Frances is briefly relieved, standing outside on Van Buren Street, in front of the restaurant with the bright tables and the dapper waitresses. But then she has to go on, to the next diner that has put up an ad in the Daily News. She is now one of countless women in Chicago who compete for jobs. She has often thought about this multitude of women. Every morning, they flow from the outskirts into the city centre like a flood. They're blonde, brunette, many are young, others already middle-aged and made up to look younger with make-up and skirts that are too short, while others are just old without any attempt at feigning youth. An army of women: secretaries, hairdressers, textile workers, daughters of farmers and daughters of factory workers. They're cheap labour because they are women and because they don't have any experience in living and working in the big city. The most visible female workers serve behind the big window fronts of the restaurants: in the more than one thousand eating establishments of Chicago. She wants to be one of them.
And so Frances moves on to the next restaurant. Here, it's a woman behind the cigar counter. She sends her to speak to a young man. He directs her to another man in one of the backrooms, to the manager who is there sorting aprons and work coats. She asks him whether he needs another waitress. He asks her if she has worked as a waitress before. She lies and says yes. He asks if she's quick on her feet. She asks whether he thinks that she looks as if she wasn't. And then yet another young man leads her down a narrow staircase and into a damp, reeking cellar. This is where ten young women change, put on lipstick, apply rouge to their cheeks, powder their noses, throw the make-up accessories back and forth, all the while cursing with a crassness that Frances has never heard before. Nobody takes any notice of her. Then one of the quieter girls help her put on her uniform. Frances is now a waitress. But she has a secret.

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On the surface, the early Parisian restaurant resembles the cafés in which the bourgeois public develops. It’s where people come together. They debate, they fight. In these establishments, everything is different from the churches or the royal court, different from the salons, the academies or educated societies. Everyone who can pay for their food and drink is allowed in. Everyone can join the conversation. Newspapers are lying around. They provide opinions to the undecided. There’s no authority that intervenes, ends controversies or dictates anything. There are fights, and at some point, or at least one might assume so, reason wins and the fight comes to a conclusion.6

But the restaurant is different from the café. You don’t visit it in order to argue with others. Nor in order to read newspapers. You come to relax or to display your sensitivity. At the table, you make an individual choice that is comparatively irrelevant to the greater political whole: a choice between chicken, venison or veal bouillon. The hybrid between public and private that one seeks out here tends to lean towards the private. The Parisian café offers spacious, open rooms. The restaurant, however, has niches, alcoves.
Guests - groups, couples - retreat to those. There are cabinets particuliers, special rooms, available, in which one can have secret conversations or that can be used for romantic or even erotic purposes. This is not a place for the heated debates of the bourgeois public. And what’s important is that men and women show up together. A rather unusual aspect - at least for non-Frenchmen around 1800 who report of this fact in astonishment.

What Frances Donovan isn't telling her colleagues: she wants to become a waitress for research purposes and not because she needs money. Which also has to do with the fatally ill William. When she realised that in the future she would have to go through life alone, she decided to get another university degree. She's majoring in English studies at the University of Chicago. And she enrolls in classes on sociology.

It is at this time that the Chicago School of Sociology, later to become famous all over the world, is forming, and Frances is there. The professors encourage their students to use the city as a laboratory. They are to examine all facets of urban life: from migration to family life and juvenile crime. They are to explore the ways in which those who recently arrived in Chicago were integrating into the city or were failing in it. Methodological reflections are irrelevant to the Chicago sociologists at that point. They are focusing on losing the ceremonial character of science. The goal is to gain experiences, to observe, to record, straightforwardly, without reflecting too much on it.

Frances Donovan is impressed by these concepts, so much so that she becomes a sociologist herself. Freelance, so to say. Without an assignment or an appointment, without any research funds. She finds no other figure in the new and wild Chicago more interesting than that of the waitress. In 1917, Frances becomes a waitress. One year later, in 1918, William is going to die of his incurable illness. Another two years later, in 1920, a book will be released by a publishing house in Boston: The Woman Who Waits, the first scientific study on the modern waitress - written by Frances Donovan.
Soon there are more fragrances than that of bouillon to be found in the Parisian restaurants of the late eighteenth century. There’s chicken and macaroni, compotes and crèmes, eggs and jams. The establishments run by the brothers Véry specialise on oysters. The »Café Hardy« distinguishes itself with barbecued meat. The »Trois Frères Provencaux« focuses on southern French cuisine, brings the bouillabaisse to Paris, uses olive oil instead of cream. In the early nineteenth century, a new type of eating establishment has taken hold, if only in Paris and hardly anywhere else in France.

This is when the age of the restaurant review begins: Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de La Reynière publishes the *Almanach des Gourmands*. It comes out on a regular basis during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Grimod is tremendously successful. Other authors before him had also discussed food. But it’s a novelty that someone focuses solely on the culinary and describes a world that seems to consist of no one but consumers and cooks.

Grimod invents the gourmand as a fictional character who wanders through the streets of Paris, looks at the sweets in the shop windows, absorbs the smell of roasted meat. He recommends small robins as a delicacy. He compares the pâtissier Rouget to the playwright Racine. He suggests butter by Theurlot and macaroni at Coarazza’s or at the »Magasin d’Italie«. A typical Parisian, he claims that the best meat may originate in the Poitou or the Auvergne, but only adopts its best taste when having been delivered to the capital. To him, nothing is too trite. His almanac also deals with the removal of stains from tablecloths. He visits and evaluates restaurants and claims to be able to ruin a restaurant’s reputation with a single sentence. And Grimod develops a new type of customer for the post-bouillon-restaurant. The gourmand is no longer too sensitive or fragile. The consumer is now, as distinguished as his tastes may be, quite healthy and strong indeed.
Authors such as Grimod, Carême or Brillat-Savarin contribute to the transformation of the mere physical act of ingesting food into an aesthetic, an intellectual practice. Their readers are curious about more and still more delights. Two social domains of the nineteenth century affect one another: gastronomy and the expanded Parisian media landscape. French cuisine only becomes French cuisine because so much is being said about it.

But as curious as the passionate, reading diners may be: the kitchen is closed to them. Only waitresses and waiters are moving back and forth between the room of consumption and the room of preparation. For everyone else the flashy area of culinary finesse is clearly separated from the steaming room of production. The success of the restaurant rests on this. It creates illusions. Just as the brothers Véry do, the owners of the restaurant so famous for its oysters. Its name is »Chez Véry«, intended to make customers think they are at their home. But that, precisely, isn't the case.

Not all customers are able to cope with this fact. In 1839, Alphonse Robert, a former officer of the infantry, throws a bottle of wine at a mirror in the restaurant »Véfour«, because the waiter won't let him chalk up his expenses. This is a very expensive and highly symbolic scene that leads to a sensational lawsuit. With his throw, the officer destroys the illusion of elegance and ease that the »Véfour« has created. The fact that the waiter brings the check at the end of a meal, however, also destroys illusions. As excellent as the food may be: the line between staff and customers is not crossed.

Frances Donovan wears a uniform now. She belongs. A blonde colleague shows her the ropes. Five stools at the counter in the front: that's her area. She's working the lunch shift from eleven thirty until half past two. First, the customer receives a glass of water, cutlery, a napkin. Then he orders. When he receives what he has ordered, a hole is punched into a card. If he orders more, further holes are punched in. The first customer has already arrived.
He wants »ham on rye« and coffee. The coffee is here. But where is she supposed to get ham on rye from? Whispering, Frances asks a colleague in a white working coat. Back there, he says, you have to call it in. He calls it in for her. And the sandwich appears. Now she’s got it. She calls out for sandwiches. Knows where the coffee is, where milk, donuts and cake are. Then someone orders the »roast beef special«. She can’t get that where she got ham on rye from. In the foundry, another waiter says. Where is the foundry? In the back. She runs. Chefs are sweating in the foundry, while waitresses are shouting in front of it, the »roast beef special« arrives with mashed potatoes and a small heap of spaghetti and the chubby, cross-eyed chef cuts up the roast beef and tells her to take thirty cents for it. Back to the tables. Someone orders »hot milk toast«. Frances calls out »hot milk toast« to the foundry, but »hot milk toast«, the chubby chef says, isn’t prepared in the foundry but in the laundry. Not back here, but in the front. Alright, quick, quick to the front. Frances shouts »hot milk toast« into the laundry. Correct. And so it goes on, from the laundry to the table, from the table to the foundry and back, napkins, cutlery, glass of water, coffee, in the middle of it all a patron in a red tie who stares at her lewdly and wants to talk to her. She doesn’t want to talk to him, definitely not. Her colleagues help her. They recommend she keep leftover butter and bread for herself, to take a dirty glass if she can’t find a clean one and to not let herself be seen doing this under any circumstances.

The second day comes and goes. The third arrives. Before work, the waitresses discuss guys in the changing room. One girl lifts up her skirts and shows the others her white satin stockings and yellow satin girdle, stolen from her landlady, who is supposedly never going to find out. Then the rush of lunch time once again. Men come, men go, most of them want a piece of meat, coffee and cake. Sometimes there’s one, handsome and dressed nicer, who orders a cream roll or a chocolate éclair. The swing door never stands still, guests push in and back out, the waitresses serve, clean, run to the laundry, to the foundry, make sure there’s napkins, a glass of water, cutlery, again and again. The manager slaps them with a rug to edge them on, the waitresses shout »Coming through!« in order to make their way
through the tight space - until, on the fourth day, a man sits down at Frances's counter and orders bread, butter, sliced peaches and black coffee. Frances serves him. The manager yells at her to bring the man cream for his coffee. Frances tells him that the man doesn't want any cream, the manager says to bring him cream anyway, again she tells him that the man didn't want any cream, the man himself tells the manager that he doesn't want cream. The man eats and leaves. The manager tells Frances never to contradict him. Again, she disagrees with him. And the manager fires her. Immediately. She is to give him her apron. Now. She takes it off and pushes it into his hand. Then she goes into the cellar and gets changed. Her colleagues cheer her up. They tell her that she's going to find another job without problem. They touch her arm and give her compliments on her pretty waist, every day they had noticed that pretty waist and with her brown eyes, so beautiful - and Frances almost begins to cry.¹⁹

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Cold roast meat and bread along with some beer in a pewter tankard: that's what you get if you go out for a meal in London during the late nineteenth century. You order something like this in a chop house, an old English institution. Or you buy, quickly during lunch break, a roll and a glass of milk to go with it. But these customs are being replaced by a new institution imported from Paris. The constantly growing number of tourists, the clerks working in offices and shops, the theatre crowd and their audience: they want more than cold roast. The restaurant is more distinguished than the traditional taverns. Or more exotic. Or both.

This makes things complicated and interesting. The new restaurants in London are run by Frenchmen, by Italians or Swiss. Many waiters are Italian, Polish or German. The latter are so ubiquitous that the German Association of Wait Staff maintains a well-equipped union house in the British capital. In the classier restaurants, the menus are naturally written
in French. It makes dining a trying experience for British customers when a foreign waiter loses track of French, English, his own mother tongue and complex culinary specialties. Some Londoners feel that the Italian food they get isn’t as good as what is being served to Italians, and on top of that it seems more expensive. And English waiters are fleeing the foreign competition. Many of them set out for New York.

But the cosmopolitan restaurant establishes itself. The capital of the Empire profits from the colonies. More and more restaurants prepare Indian meals. Indians are standing in the kitchens and exude competence, as impressed observers note. Around 1900, an Indian establishment offers, in quite the modern fashion, a delivery service for all homes that can be reached with the underground. The manufacturer of »Nizam Madras Curry Powder« employs a chef who can come to every »hotel, club or restaurant« and teach lessons in Indian cooking. Even an Italian restaurant suddenly starts serving veal chop in curry sauce (a critic praises its »distinctive excellence«). In London, you can now have Chinese and Malaysian meals, Greek pastries and Nigerian soup. At the turn of the twentieth century, the former capital of cold roast meat experiences globalisation on a plate and in the stomach.20

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Around 1900, gourmets can find high-end cuisine in the restaurants of the big palace hotels.21 Twice a day, hundreds of customers are being served there: luxurious dishes in the French tradition. In 1889, the London »Savoy« opens, followed by the »Palace Hotel« in St. Moritz in 1895 and the »Four Seasons« in Hamburg in 1897. This is where the European and American financial elite meets in order to eat and be seen. And whether in London or in St. Moritz, the upper ten thousand eat always the same. Every place serves caviar and lobster. Heavy sauces are sloshing on plates everywhere. Distinguished maître d’hôtels are flambéing crêpes suzette. Blue flames flicker, liquor-filled smoke rises up. This is to evoke a »feeling of proper respect« in the guests, says the wife of the hotelier Ritz.22
The ill-paid chefs of these palaces remain invisible and disrespected. They work fourteen, fifteen, sixteen hours a day. Most of them die by the age of forty. Physical overexertion as well as the generally windowless, badly ventilated kitchens are to blame for that. Cooks have more occupational illnesses than mine workers. They suffer from chronic oxygen deficiency, tuberculosis, varicose veins and - surprisingly - from malnutrition.²³

This is the world Georges Auguste Escoffier comes from - and is going to reform: the halls of the restaurants as well as the kitchens. His 1903 *Guide Culinaire* is the work of a reformer.²⁴ Food, Escoffier says, should go back to looking like food.²⁵ His conviction that everything to be found on the plate should be edible is groundbreaking in this ornamental age. Escoffier is no culinary revolutionary. He cannot part with the heavy sauces. But time and again he is inspired by the simple cuisine of the French countryside. The composition of the dishes should be understandable. The diner should be able to recognize the ingredients. Escoffier is the inventor of a variety of new, creatively named dishes. He develops the dessert »peach Melba« and dedicates it to the actress Nellie Melba. The »consommé Zola« with white truffles is named in reference to the author. The »suprêmes de volaille Jeanette«, a dish of cold fowl, is named after a ship that wrecked during a polar expedition. He laments that there is no copyright protection for culinary inventions.²⁶

First and foremost, however, Escoffier forms theories on the division of labour that should determine the cooking process. In his kitchen, there are specific responsibilities: there's the rôtisseur, the saucier, the pâtissier, the gardemanger, the entremetier. Previously, it had taken an individual chef fifteen minutes to prepare »œufs Meyerbeer«. In Escoffier's kitchens, it takes but a few minutes until the entremetier has the eggs on hand, followed immediately by the rôtisseur with the slices of lamb's kidney and the saucier with the truffle sauce.²⁷ The newly organised kitchen is cleaner, brighter and more secure, also for the men who work in it. And, above all, it is faster and more efficient.

Escoffier points out directly why this is imperative. The customers of the early twentieth century don't have time anymore. The restaurateur
cannot take a «feeling of proper respect» for granted, however dramatically
the waiters might flambé things. The attention span for drawn-out meals
and elaborate dishes isn’t guaranteed in the early twentieth century. Modern
diners, Escoffier says, only have «eyes for each other» and none for the
meal.28 Again the point has arrived where particularly those people who
don’t have a lot of interest in the food visit restaurants.

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Frances Donovan writes about rats and dirt and what she perceives as human «scum» in the kitchen. But all she actually cares about are the
waitresses: the girls in the changing room, the affectionate fighters with their
rough manners and stolen underwear. She portrays young women who take
off their wedding ring in order to receive more tips. She knows that the
slowest servers work in the warehouse cafeteria while the most beautiful
work in the so-called cafés. This is where the pay is best; those women wear
the latest fashion, satin stockings, the most delicate pink undergarments.29

Frances Donovan appreciates her colleagues, except for those who
steal her tips or her pencil. But still she views them with the eye of the
scientist. Or rather with that of the woman she is after all: a little older,
educated, upper middle class, a woman who feels superior to the waitresses.
She considers herself more virtuous. She critically notes that they were
actually ashamed of their work, that they wanted to seem elegant but that
their bad English betrayed them time and again. «There is not much that is
complex about the waitress,» she concludes in the summary of her studies,
her behavior can easily be reduced to the two fundamental appetites of food
hunger and sex hunger.»30

Because that is what she assumes, she observes her colleagues’ bodies
closely. In the changing rooms she is looking at exposed chests, fresh skin,
and she wonders how many of these sexually quite active young women
suffer from syphilis. She cites statistics from the year 1915, according to
which the Chicago waitresses lead the table of professional groups with the
most sexually transmitted diseases by a large margin.31
But after nine months of working in various restaurants, Frances Donovan cannot hide her admiration. »She is often unwashed,« she writes about the waitress type, »and her teeth are unfilled but she knows life and she is not afraid of life which is to her big, dramatic, brutal but vivid, full of color.« The server seems to her a »free soul.« The fact that she goes out into the world, fights in it: Donovan respects that. The waitress was entirely different than those women who »come running with a smile to greet the husband when he rings the bell at evening time«. And so she praises the »striking personalities in this vulgar Bohemian group« and sees the waitress as part of a feminist movement that demands freedom for all women.

Comments

1 Frances Donovan, *The Woman Who Waits* [1920], New York: Arno, 1974, pp.17-18; Heather Paul Kurent, *Frances R. Donovan and the Chicago School of Sociology: A Case Study in Marginality*, unpublished dissertation, University of Maryland, 1982, pp. 53, 80-81. Here and in the following chapters, details of specific locations and situations as well as actions, perceptions and thoughts of historical protagonists do not stem from the author's imagination, but in each instance from the texts mentioned in these annotations (autobiographies, journalistic reports, essays, scientific texts, cookbooks, less often: works of fiction). Literal quotes are always marked as such in the text.


7 Spang, Invention, pp. 86-87.

8 In a reflection on restaurants by Rousseau (here on «Chez Vacossins», around 1777), the new gastronomical institution is also associated with intimacy and privacy rather than with public issues (Spang, Invention, pp. 59).


10 Plummer points out that the term «Chicago School» was first used in the 1930s and altogether promises a greater coherence than is actually to be observed in the heterogeneous approaches of the Chicago sociologists (Ken Plummer, «Introduction», in: The Chicago School: Critical Assessments, vol. I: A Chicago Canon?, edited by Ken Plummer, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 4-5 [pp. 3-40]).


15 Robert Appelbaum, Dishing It Out: In Search of the Restaurant Experience, London: Reaktion, 2011, p. 63. Spang observes that the satirical moment in Grimod’s almanac is lost to most contemporary readers: cultural criticism and political satire were ignored, as was the artificiality of the gourmand as a character. Due to this fact, and through patterns of reception, reviewing restaurants emerged as an art form that only referenced one thing: eating and drinking as a world completely separate from everything else (Spang, Invention, pp. 158-159).


17 Ferguson, Accounting for Taste, pp. 10-11.

18 Spang, Invention, pp. 238-241.


26 Shaw, *The World of Escoffier*, pp. 119-121.


28 quoted in: Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, p. 159.


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