Educated Tastes

Food, Drink, and Connoisseur Culture

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Chapter Three

The Flavor of the Place

Eating and Drinking in Payottenland

TIM WATERMAN

In the time before the reign of products that are sorted, graded, carved, prepackaged, and packaged in an anonymous form where only the generic name attests their original nature, everything had flavour because everything was dangerous.

Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol

The beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love. I believe that a landscape which makes these qualities manifest is one that can be called beautiful.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson

Belgium: Flanders and Payottenland

The popular image of Flanders is of a flat and somewhat bland landscape. The north of Flanders does little to belie this stereotype. Driving south from Dunkirk, there is little topography, and what little exists is usually the result of human intervention rather than geology. The landscape also flattens out visually into the distance. Objects near and far are juxtaposed against one another without depth or perspective, like cut-out scenery sliding across a stage set. Flanders is famous for its towers and belfries, which gain some of their imposing nature through contrast with the low landscape. As one approaches Brussels, though, a more voluptuous landscape grows from little ripples into hills, with small towns grouped around churches, tree-lined roads, and tidy hedgerows. It is a cozy landscape with only the barest of hints that the dark forest of the Ardennes and the rusted heavy industry of Wallonia lies beyond. This area, to the west and southwest of Brussels, is an area known as Payottenland, and the coziness one sees in the approach is qualified, compromised by numerous tensions, psychological and political, that at times inscribe themselves onto the landscape.

Payottenland is part of the province of Flemish Brabant, and it is inhabited by both Flemish and Walloons. Belgium is not one nation, but two: Flanders to the north and francophone Wallonia to the south. Payottenland lies on the fault line between the two. This fracture is a tectonic divide of language and culture, and its extreme and constant pressure inevitably results in seismic events in politics and prejudice. The big earthquakes are felt across Belgium and in the halls of its government, while the tremors are much smaller and the damage local: shattered glass, a lick of flame, a shadow disappearing into night.

Payottenland also sits on another kind of divide, and one equally difficult to define, that of the urban fringe. It is the interface between urban and rural, a seemingly haphazard assemblage of housing, industry, and open fields. It is transected by infrastructure leading into Brussels: roads, railway tracks, power lines, canals, and the lugubrious River Senne. In this densely settled part of Europe—and Flanders has been incredibly dense since the Middle Ages—one urban fringe can often seem to blend seamlessly into the next. Despite, or perhaps because of all this, Belgians have made a virtue of the uneventful and ordinary. This is a landscape that is comfortable rather than inspirational, often pretty but rarely beautiful. Its deficits are measured mainly as pragmatic necessities, not as compromises or intrusions.

The historic village life in the area would have been much the same as in many areas of Europe: an agrarian existence, shaped by the relationship between fields, home, market, and church. Flemish villages, as so many elsewhere, were traditionally centered around a church, which usually sits even now just opposite a café. Roads and paths lead out radially from the church. The congregation was composed of those who lived within walking distance of the center, and thus was the community defined. The radial routes into the church would have passed farms, which, like miniature castles, formed a sort of defended enclave with the house, barn, and outbuilding ranged around a yard. Farm buildings looked inward to the courtyard rather than out to the landscape, with their backs resolutely set against winds, rains, and adversity. Belgian life is still very much an interior one, focused on the creature comforts of the home and the pleasures of the table.

It is still possible to find these patterns imprinted upon Payottenland. On a map, village cores are a dense knot of streets clustered around an often awkwardly, organically trapezoidal church square. Radial routes may still be traced. These routes, though, have become encrusted with structures, in the same way a string suspended in salt water collects crystals. It is often no longer possible to tell where one town leaves off and another takes up as the intervening space is filled with car dealerships, furniture showrooms, budget supermarkets, and all other such markers of the urban fringe. Passing through the area by car along certain routes, it might never be apparent that one was in the countryside at all. And countryside is just what the people who live there wish it to be. In Payottenland a new generation is attempting to imprint a rural ideal upon a stretch of land that for many years served only as a hinterland—a zone hitherto beneath notice registering only, if at all, as a mysterious realm of uncertain use and occupation beginning at the garbage cans behind the endless strip and extending to the back doors of the next strip. Perpendicular to this grain is a "gradient from urban core, to community urban fringe to urban

fringe farmland to urban shadow."[1] It is perhaps this lack of definition, spiced with dereliction, that makes it possible to cast this productive area as a mysterious landscape that is perfectly capable of accepting romanticization. This area of exurban overspill is actually a tremendously valuable stretch of cultural landscape fertile with latent potential.

In the village of Eizeringen—just off the intersection of the busy road from Asse to Enghien (and eventually Mons) and the road from Brussels to Ninove (both so crisply straight that one can feel the bite of the cartographer's pen against the ruler)—is to be found a delightful traditional Payot café called In de Verzekering tegen de Grote Dorst (Insurance against Great Thirst). It is open only on Sundays "for those on their way to church, those on the way home from church, and those who say they are going to church, but don't make it."[2] It is run by the brothers Yves and Kurt Panneels, who took over as proprietors from its octogenarian landlady in 1999. Since their careful restoration of the café, a window opens into the past every Sunday.[3] It has become common for beer connoisseurs to make pilgrimages to the café, where they stock an exhaustive selection of traditional Payot beers. This is historic preservation as it should be. It preserves not just a building and the surrounding spaces, but the way of life that animates them. It is an urbanite's ideal of country living, but one that works with the place and its people rather than imposing a ludicrous fantasy.

It is a cliché that "everyone eats well in Belgium," though, as with all clichés, it is well-founded. The patterns of living that make it possible for the In de Verzekering tegen de Grote Dorst to continue to exist are still alive and well in the Belgian kitchen. The North Sea makes possible a mouthwatering range of seafood, particularly the sweet, plump mussels that have become emblematic of Belgian cuisine. They are at their best in the autumn and winter before their spawning season begins, and a giant pail of mussels steamed with cream and white beer is just the thing to take the chill off. Succulent "eel in the green" (*paling in 't groen* or

anguilles au vert) is another favorite—thick slices of eel in a sauce of wine and green herbs such as sorrel, sage, and chervil. *Waterzooi* ("watery mess") is either a chicken or seafood stew made with leeks, potatoes, eggs, and cream. The seafood version may contain eel, pike, or carp, and possibly also shellfish.

The influence from the south, the Ardennes, contributes a love of game. Rabbit is served grilled or cooked slowly and sauced richly with its own blood. Wild boar, partridge, and venison make regular appearances at table in a myriad of forms from roasts to stews to patés and sausages (sausages are often served with *stoemp*—mashed potatoes and vegetables). Every menu also features beef, and always *stoofvlees* (*carbonnade Flamande*), the quintessential Belgian stew of beef and sweet brown beer. Belgium, though a fraction of the size of France, produces roughly as many different types of cheese. Few but the formidable, perhaps notorious Limburger cheese, are known outside Belgium, though, as most are produced locally by small producers. It can be a challenge, even, to find Belgian cheeses in Belgian supermarkets.

While the Belgian diet is almost always anchored by meat, vegetables also receive more than their due. The princeliest of vegetables are at their best here, many raised in the dark, secret earth and plucked in tender youth—it is the illicit air of decadence that lends them their cachet. The delightfully bitter Belgian endive or chicory (*witloof/chicon*) features in many typical dishes. They are almost always cooked, whereas elsewhere in the world they may appear more commonly as a salad vegetable. Asparagus, either green or white, is consumed with gratitude in season. A specialty that has experienced a resurgence lately comprises the shoots of the hop plant (*jets d'houblon*). These are harvested like asparagus, but in February and March, and are commonly served with a mousseline sauce (hollandaise folded with whipped cream just before serving) and poached eggs.

It is no surprise that the hop plant should make an appearance in cuisine, as everyone drinks well in Belgium too. This is

the cool, damp north, though, and few wine grapes are found here. Belgium's extraordinary range of local cheese is matched or outmatched by a dizzying variety of exquisite, hand-crafted beers. Even the mass-produced lagers are a cut above, and the run-of-the-mill such as Bel, Maes, or Stella Artois are flavorful and stimulating. At the other end of the spectrum are the six world-famous and highly alcoholic beers produced by Trappist monks: Westvleteren, Westmalle, Rochefort, Orval, Achel, and Chimay. These are usually "double" and "triple" beers—rich, sweet brown beers. There are many other styles as well, the most common being blonde or golden ales, the most famous of which is Duvel, and white beers—fruity, cloudy light beers typified by Hoegaarden. Every beer in Belgium is meant to be served in its own distinctively shaped glass, and the best cafés will ensure that they have the correct glass on hand for every beer they serve. Many of the beers I have mentioned (with the notable exception of Westvleteren, which is available only at the abbey in limited quantities or by reservation) have international brand profiles, but most of the rest are distinctly local products, produced on a small scale locally by people who brew as a labor of love on a marginal wage.

The people of Payottenland, and Belgium as a whole, are often fiercely (though not exclusively) loyal to their local producers, and it is this characteristic that both allows these producers to exist and yet limits their range and commercial viability. It also, presumably, has the effect of ensuring a continuing market despite incursions from the big supermarkets. In turn, it keeps the pressure on supermarkets to provide quality products. It helps to ensure that the average food consumed in Belgium is not merely adequate, but delicious too.

The *Terroir* of Lambic

Terroir is a French term that is most often used in relation to oenology, the study of wine.[4] In this sense it refers to the effect of soils, geology, topography, and climate upon the flavor of wine

from a given region. The French *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC) system defines and protects agricultural products such as wines and cheeses from specific regions. Other countries as well as the European Union as a whole also protect the names of foods and beverages based on their origins. These products are held to possess character and qualities that can only be produced by certain methods in a certain region. While terroir certainly refers to this, it also refers to the patterns of habitation and the practices of daily life that have evolved in an area as a complex interrelationship between a landscape and its inhabitants. In this sense, the idea of terroir is not too terribly different from the definition of cultural landscape. The UNESCO World Heritage Commission defines cultural landscapes as those "that are representative of the different regions of the world. Combined works of nature and humankind, they express a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment."[5] The implication is that, while the flavors of some agricultural products are deeply dependent upon a region and upon human practice in a certain area, these products also exert a strong influence upon the personality and cultural identity of people in that same area. You are what you eat. And what one eats, at least ideally, is an indelible connection to one's environment.

The French AOC system is very specific about certain products, such as wines and cheeses. Elsewhere, though, and for other products there is less or no emphasis on terroir. Beer is one such product, and possibly this is because of a long-standing association of wine with the cultured upper classes and beer as a drink of the masses. With wine prices being pushed ever downward, the premium prices of many top-quality beers would seem to reverse that social order, especially with restaurant markups. Still, the question must be asked whether the term *terroir* can apply to beer. I believe so. A few years ago, when I had first moved back to England, I was riding on one of the last "slam-door" trains through the area around Faversham, what is now possibly the last remnant of the

Kentish hop-growing landscape. I was drinking a bottle of Spitfire, a bitter beer brewed in Faversham. When fresh, the beer has a most stimulating spicy, fiery hop character, and it could just as well be this, as well as the British fighter plane, for which it is named. As I drank, the train passed farm workers loading freshly harvested hops into a truck. The sharp perfume of the hops filled the train through the open windows. The hops being loaded were probably destined for the brewery in Faversham, and the experience of tasting the beer and smelling the fresh hops simultaneously was both electrifying and somehow chthonic. It was like being plugged into the landscape and, literally, grounded.

Many readers will be familiar with English bitter beers, but far fewer will have ever tasted, or even be aware of the existence of lambic and gueuze beers. Lambic is particular to Payottenland and Brussels, and its production is now limited to a handful of brewers. Lembeek, which is the home of the Boon Brewery, is the source of the name "lambic." Lambic beers are produced in what must be the original method of brewing beer around the world. "In traditional lambic fermentation, freshly brewed wort [the liquid extracted from cooked grains in the brewing process] is left in an open shallow vat to cool, usually overnight. Naturally occurring yeast land on and drop into the sweet mixture. When properly cooled the next day this wort is drained into large oak casks, where it ferments slowly for between six months and three years."[6] The wild yeasts that settle into the wort are a mix specific to the Senne Valley, and they include the yeast *Brettanomyces bruxellensis*, which is named for Brussels. Most if not all other brewing processes, at least in Europe, are highly controlled and sanitary. Lambic breweries, in striking contrast, exhibit exposed wooden beams draped with spider webs (the spiders control the fruit flies) and an overall atmosphere that can only be described as, well, yeasty.[7] The enjoyment of lambic is definitely an acquired taste. It is a flat beer, served fresh at cellar temperature in earthenware jugs. It packs an attack of tartness at the front of a whole

range of earthy, antediluvian flavors that may invoke leather, mildew, or mud. The flavor of lambic lifts and separates the taste buds in the same way that fresh, unsweetened grapefruit juice does. It is a down-home drink that is as macho as bourbon.

I met with Chris Pollard, an expert on Belgian beers who coauthored the book *Lambicland*. He told me that lambic is the taste of Payottenland, and associated with country life and labor in the fields. Gueuze, on the other hand, is the taste of cosmopolitan Brussels and "the Champagne of Belgium." Gueuze (the name of which may be from the Norman word for wheat, which is a common ingredient along with barley) is a sexed-up, blended lambic that undergoes a secondary fermentation in champagne bottles and is topped with a wired-on cork. The second fermentation makes it a sparkling beverage. Gueuze is produced from the output of various lambic breweries and of various vintages, in much the same way that blended scotch is handled. The blending adds complexity and depth, and the natural carbonation satisfies more effervescent urban tastes. Fruit is also added to lambics, the most traditional being sour cherries, which produce a drink called *kriek*. Raspberries and blackcurrants often make an appearance, and occasionally sugar or caramel is added to make *faro*. A range of Belgian malt beverages flavored with fruit syrups are currently causing confusion with the more traditional beers, but these are tailored to juvenile tastes, and have little character other than as sweet/fruit pablum. The flavor of real lambic beers is stamped with the moist air of the Senne Valley and it is a palpable link to a whole history of inhabitation of the area. To taste it in Payottenland is to experience the same sort of chthonic connection to place that I felt drinking bitter in Kent.

The complex and earthy flavors of lambic and gueuze beers make them the perfect complement to much of Belgian cuisine, from the gamey flavors of boar and rabbit to the decadent spears of asparagus and jets d'houblon as well as fat, bitter little chicories. The sharp, citrusy flavors of gueuze also cleanse the palate between bites of what is often rich and creamy food. They may even help

to curtail the appetite somewhat, helping to reduce the damage done by all that saturated fat, though this may be wishful thinking. To acquire a taste for lambic and gueuze is to gain entrance to a spectrum of sensation and a way of life that is peculiar, and special, to Payottenland.

Acquired Taste, Discovered Taste, Accrued Taste

Taste, though it can be defined as a single sense, is never truly autonomous. The boundaries between taste and olfaction are blurred. Those without the sense of smell find it difficult to taste anything as a result. Taste also involves touch—the way a food or drink feels in the mouth has a distinct influence on its flavor. In fact, the boundaries of the sense of taste continue to swell ever outward to include all the human senses and numerous variables such as color and composition in the presentation of food, positive or negative associations, and so on. Taste, ultimately, has psychosocial and cultural meaning that is not altogether inseparable from the five senses at any time.

Babies rely early on their sense of taste to explore the world around them and make meaning of it. If possible, every object is inspected, felt, and tasted. Through these encounters, the infant pieces together a composite portrait of the surrounding environment and landscape that is the basis for taste preference and has a strong influence on personality, identity, and character. In this way, even if children are not consuming the produce of their immediate landscape, which is likely the case for first-world children who may eat a largely processed diet sourced from supermarkets and franchised restaurants, they are probably still responding to taste stimuli that are rooted in their native landscape. Local preferences, even in a globalized market, may still be the result not just of local acculturation (nurture), but of a direct relationship with soil, air, climate, and vegetation of a place (nature). Many discovered basic tastes, then, may not be completely universal, but may be tempered to one degree or another by the landscape of place.

Discovered tastes are those that might be considered to be innate. Bland, salty, and sweet foods—"comfort foods"—have instant appeal to infantile tastes. Some tastes may well be nearly universal. There are probably only a handful of people of any age, anywhere in the world, who wouldn't be seduced by a plate of perfectly golden-fried Belgian *frites*, for example (though some might object to the Belgian preference for serving them crowned with mayonnaise. I myself can't fathom the practice of eating them with ketchup). Because of the instant rewards of comfort foods, products are engineered for the market to pander to and encourage these basic tastes, which can often be quite addictive. The food industry probably has much to gain from playing to childish or "kidult" tastes and from actively infantilizing the consumer. Unfortunately, the consumer has little to gain from this market dynamic except weight.

In a healthy environment where the development of taste is not inhibited, taste is slowly developed. The more we learn to like, the broader our range of choices and combinations becomes, and the more open we become to further taste possibilities. I will call this *accrued taste*. Accrued taste is acquired taste that is learned, constructed and additive, contextual and associative, but not necessarily intentional. It may be the discovery that a food is pleasing because it is sauced with hunger, or it may simply be that repetition has bestowed familiarity, which has grown into fondness.

Educated taste I shall define as acquired taste derived from intentional taste explorations. If a people come to believe, wish to believe, or are coerced into believing that learning to like something will enrich their lives, then they will undertake to do so, even though the process may be unpleasant. It is the taste equivalent of "working out" or "reading up." Scotch whisky is the sterling example of this. I have slowly grown to find single malt whisky quite indispensable, though at first only the gentler brands were acceptable. The first time I brought home a whisky from the Isle of Islay, I was horrified at the taste that assaulted me. It was as

though I had uncorked a Molotov cocktail. The bouquet was of tar pit, and the flavor was of diesel. I don't believe I finished the glass, and the offending bottle remained at the back of the cabinet for some months. A visit from an American friend, though, prompted a tasting of the various scotches I had on hand. Tentatively, I retrieved the bottle, brushing off the dust, and, warning my companion about the violence I was about to do to his palate, poured some. This time, however, I was more prepared for its flavor. I found it challenging, but not altogether unpleasant. It was only a matter of weeks before I tried it again, and by the time the bottle was finished, I was quite enjoying it and looking forward to trying more Islay whiskies. Now a couple of the Islay malts rank among my great favorites, profound comforts.

Educating taste is usually quite rewarding in this way. There is the satisfaction of having overcome an obstacle, the pleasure of adding a new experience to a repertoire of experiences, and the lift of knowing that one's tastes are now a marker of difference, perhaps even superiority. Further, the acquisition of tastes through intention leads to the possibility of more innocently accrued tastes building upon a new framework and expanded context. To complicate matters, though, educating taste is also a process of elimination. Often, in acquiring new tastes, we leave others behind as an act of casting aside the training wheels, perhaps, or as a conscious step up the class ladder, and this expression can be quite violent in its refusal. Pierre Bourdieu, in his landmark study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* states: "Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others."[8]

Fitting in to a social and physical environment involves both

accrued and educated acquired tastes, in the process of the accumulation of Bourdieu's "cultural capital." We first become attuned to the landscape in which we are raised, beginning with the infant's explorations. Geophagy, the consumption of soil, is common among children, and is one quite vivid and literal way in which the landscape might be internalized, understood, ingested, digested. Later in life, acquired taste will be a way to identify with a certain group, whether this is acquiring upwardly mobile tastes for champagne and truffles, or simply a liking for lager to facilitate and lubricate conviviality at the local watering hole. Bourdieu again, this time at some length:

> Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. And statistical analysis does indeed show that oppositions similar in structure to those found in cultural practices also appear in eating habits. The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition—linked to different distances from necessity—between the taste of necessity, which favors the most "filling" and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty—or luxury—which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating, etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function.[9]

The larger issues of identity can be descried in these taste ambitions (or lack thereof), and the elements of personality both drive those ambitions and are informed and shaped by them. It is possible that acquired tastes have little to do with basic needs, but rather could be seen as practices or tactics to enable us to discriminate and navigate through everyday life. They may well be essential,

though, to making a home in a community. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, in volume 2 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, point out that "the practice of the neighborhood introduces gratuitousness instead of necessity; it favors a use of urban space whose end is not only functional."[10] It also favors a deployment of taste whose end is not only functional—a fact reinforced by the tendency of the wealthy and privileged to be distinguished by being thin—a perverse reversal in which the existence of plenty is displayed through the appearance of scarcity. Less signifies more. Educating taste, in this case, becomes not only *like* working out, but the appearance of it actually *requires* working out.

The Agony of Taste

Agony and ecstasy dwell in close proximity to one another. Agony is a sensation not only allied with pain, but with competition, with striving and aspiration. It's not unusual for the most satisfying emotions to have both a dark and a light side. The bittersweet and the melancholy, for example, are experiences with a piquancy derived from a mixture of pleasure and pain. It is also a measure of the emotional content of taste that terms relating to taste, such as "bittersweet" and "piquant," should so aptly describe a state of being.[11] In all its aspects, life is a jumble of emotions that are always queerly juxtaposed, and the ability to savor the mix is the ability to apprehend all of life and to draw nourishment from it. Chocolate, dark chocolate, perfectly contains this delightful opposition—and Belgian chocolate is without argument the best in the world. Without the sweetness (and light) of sugar, chocolate is too intense for most tastes. It is almost black, the color of oblivion, but the mild euphoria it delivers is elevating. Cocoa grows in messy, fetid conditions necessitated by the habitat of its pollinators, but the best chocolate is sold in immaculate, light-filled boutiques like Pierre Marcolini in the Place du Grand Sablon in Brussels. Marcolini's exquisite chocolates certainly walk the razor's edge

of agony and ecstasy, a taste that can only be delivered on a small and exclusive scale by producers with passion.

Payottenland has its own producer with the same sort of passion as Pierre Marcolini. Armand Debelder is the owner and brewmaster at the Drie Fonteinen Brewery in Beersel, a tidy, intimate town with a small but well-formed castle and pleasant, composed views over Payottenland. He is an elegant, confident, and well-spoken man who is a proselytizing believer in lambic beers and who produces some of the very finest. I spoke with him in the "Lambik-o-Droom" tasting room at his brewery, and he underscored many of the themes that have been appearing increasingly, and for good reason, in the media: the importance of the small producer, the virtues of sourcing goods locally, the need to maintain patrimony and tradition for future generations, and shedding empty consumerist ambitions in favor of those things that are "free."

He has lived his life in Payottenland, and he told me that there are two moments of that life that stand out as possessing singular beauty. The first was the birth of his granddaughter, and the second was the death of his mother. His mother died in winter, a season she loved. As the family gathered around in the last moments of her life, they threw open the shutters into the yard, where the light picked out the flakes of falling snow. Why these two moments? Because they contain agony and joy; sorrow, pain, and hope. Because they are about the continuity of life in a landscape, belonging in family, community, place. As I listened and sipped an astounding gueuze, it seemed that the flavors presented in that drink held all the richness and depth of such a story. Tart like tears and brash like laughter and with undertones of sweat and soil, longing and belonging. If a drink can be a true reflection of a place and a people, of terroir, then Armand Debelder's gueuze is a textbook example.

It is, of course, difficult to discern how much of the intensity of this taste experience is held within the beverage itself. Does it, in fact, intrinsically contain all this information? The question could

well be metaphysical, and it is delightful to contemplate that the flavor could tap into an ancestral collective consciousness. More pragmatically, as a cultural construct, educated taste is the product of foreknowledge and context that shape the experience. The story thus influences and enhances the taste, though it would be unpoetic and unnecessary to rule out metaphysical factors. Indeed, beliefs and spirituality are integral to the formation of place through practice. Bourdieu notes: "But one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless 'culture,' in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into 'culture' in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavors of food."[12] And the elaborated taste for the most refined places, for homeland, for landscape are inextricably tied to culture in the anthropological sense and the flavors of food in a way that is basic to identity and is fundamentally both ideological and spiritual. Terroir implies that taste is much more than simply aesthetic judgment, but is (or at its best can be) part of the total framework of identity that is a construct not only of human associations, but of the full matrix of associations across home, work, and community that are bound together by modes of occupation and daily practice in the landscape.

The Tower of Babel

The Tower of Babel has somehow haunted me the whole time I have been in the process of writing this essay, appearing in conversation and print and image, though I doubt I have heard the story mentioned in years. Armand Debelder spoke of it when he talked about the appreciation of those things that are "free," like bluebells in the spring, rather than those that are accorded value due to supposed rarity or exclusiveness. Indeed, many things are accorded value simply because they are expensive. Debelder's brewing is an attempt to find a better way of operating in the world, a more authentic mode. He sees society as building a new Tower of Babel, one that is surely destined to collapse.

The story of the Tower of Babel is the classic tale of hubris. It ends with the fall of the tower and the fragmentation of a great, unified society that is undone by its own arrogance. The punishment for attempting an ascent to heaven from the mortal earth is the dispersion of the people across the lands and the appearance of myriad different languages. Thus the groundwork is laid for misunderstanding and misinterpretation, the drawing and redrawing of boundaries, fractiousness, skirmishes, battles, wars, ethnic cleansing, and all-out genocide. Ironically, the linguistic and geographic distance between people is also the foundation of exotic difference, of the allure of the foreign. It is this other that draws us but also is thrown into relief to remind us of the comforts of home. Linguistic and cultural differences are interlinked with geography, producing terroir. Producing the taste *of* the place, informing the taste *for* the place.

Our most enduring images of the Tower of Babel come from the Flemish painters. That of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in particular, shows a tower possibly modeled on the Colosseum in Rome, but placed in a landscape that is ineffably Flemish; tall, pointy houses fill a lowland landscape that merges effortlessly with the sea. In the castle at Gaasbeek, which looks out over the Payot landscape, there hangs a large rendition of the same scene by another, later Flemish painter. The lesson of the Tower of Babel seems to have been taken to heart in Belgium and is taught with the same gravity in a very secular society that it once was in a rigidly Catholic medieval Flanders. The tale, after all, has resonance for a society that is so starkly separated by language. The popularity of the story may also reflect the Belgian respect, even love, for the ordinary or quotidian. The popularity of the story in Belgium also reflects the divide in language and culture that so bedevils the country.

In the current economic collapse, we are once again being punished for heedlessness and hubris. We have become further fractured, not just nationally or regionally, but into single solitary individuals who are losing the ability to communicate and cooperate. We have become tiny islands of greed whose actions may be justified solely by invoking the rights of the sovereign individual or the privilege bestowed by the status of wealth. Yeast, even the noble *Brettanomyces bruxellensis*, will eat sugars voraciously, dividing and increasing as they sate themselves. In the process, though, they produce alcohol, which in sufficient quantity paralyzes the mass of them. People are not so unlike yeast. We keep eating, consuming, producing waste until the environment is toxic, until the tower falls. In these times it is ever more crucial to seek out the cultural ties that bind, to reach out to one another to rebuild community and to begin to live in and use the landscape once more. We look at landscape through a frame, at a distance, and it is landscape that puts food on the table, that provides open spaces for meeting and greeting, that provides air and light and health. It is a good time to reconnect, and Payottenland provides some compelling possibilities.

The New Payot Landscape

For much of Western Europe, the legacy of the Industrial Revolution seems to have receded impossibly far into the past. The economy is now often based upon retail and services, especially financial services. The frustration and disorientation that people may have felt leaving behind meaningful trades and well-defined roles and struggling to make a way in a world without any definitions except rich and poor, laborer and master of industry, are hard to fathom today. And yet, one of the characteristics of the Industrial Revolution was the "struggle to maintain wages, material welfare, and moral values against the exploitive and alienating implications of the new form of social organization being forged in the factories and cities."[13] This struggle seems suddenly, desperately pertinent again, despite the fact that the shifting ground of social organization is utterly different. We may now be moving into an age when people will once again define themselves in terms of trades and activities rather than simply wage, class, and branded lifestyle.

Characteristic of the struggle during the Industrial Revolution were the actions of the Luddites and the *saboteurs*, but their actions have come to be seen as merely antiprogress or anti-industry, rather than defensive of a *moral economy*, one "founded on custom and attributed status as the dominant conditions of human relationships." The emergence of a *political economy* (italics mine), one "founded upon contract and the status provided by access to capital and the means of production," during the Industrial Revolution affected not only the cities, but colonized the countryside with mines and mills while it consolidated the means of agricultural production and distribution.[14] The emergent relationship between city and countryside was less clear than it had been in the Middle Ages, where dense cities were separated from the surrounding territory by a strong demarcated boundary. Now cities displayed a dense core and a diffuse boundary where agricultural production, noxious industry, waste, and transport corridors interwove. The haphazard nature of the resulting landscape was so disorganized as to be apparently placeless. Carolyn Steel, in her book *Hungry City*, which manages to be simultaneously delightful and ominous, says, "As civilization is city-centric, it is hardly surprising that we have inherited a lopsided view of the urban-rural relationship. Visual representations of cities have tended to ignore their rural hinterlands, somehow managing to give the impression that their subjects were autonomous, while narrative history has relegated the countryside to a neutral green backdrop, good for fighting battles in, but little else."[15] The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan had earlier noted similar trends, but emphasized the ideal of the country as pleasure ground: "In modern life physical contact with one's natural environment is increasingly indirect and limited to special occasions. Apart from the dwindling farm population, technological man's involvement with nature is recreational rather than vocational."[16]

The creeping desecration of and separation from the rural landscape was accompanied by a conflicting set of attitudes toward the

country in city dwellers: the first an Arcadian idyll, and the second of a forgotten and forlorn, muddy, dusty place inhabited by inbred and ill-educated country bumpkins. While there may be an element of truth to both, city life contains the same sorts of extremes (and stereotypes) from the cosmopolitan high life to Skid Row. Country life has now changed so drastically that there is hardly anyone left in it to apply any stereotypes to. Steel goes on to say,

> Meanwhile, the countryside we like to imagine just beyond our urban borders is a carefully sustained fantasy. For centuries, city-dwellers have seen nature through a one-way telescope, molding its image to fit their urban sensibilities. The pastoral tradition, with its hedgerows and its meadows full of fluffy sheep, is part of that tendency, as is the Romantic vision of nature, all soaring peaks, noble firs and plunging gorges. Neither bears any relation to the sort of landscape capable of feeding a modern metropolis. Fields of corn and soya stretching as far as the eye can see, plastic polytunnels so vast they can be seen from space, industrial sheds and feed lots full of factory-farmed animals—these are the rural hinterlands of modernity.[17]

Preindustrial cities depended heavily upon their hinterlands, often in a virtuous cycle in which fruits and vegetables were cultivated in soil enriched by human waste collected in the cities as "night soil." This loop has been broken, with waste pushed ever further away and produce shipped from the four corners of the earth. The rural hinterland that Steel speaks of is at a significant remove from most of our cities. Thus a rural hinterland is no longer synonymous with an urban hinterland. The urban hinterland has ceased to be a landscape whose importance is primarily production and is now cast in the same role as an Arcadian landscape, as a landscape of leisure, consumption, and recreation. In many European countries, as in America, the countryside is

now the setting for luxury second homes, often in a rustic style or in reinhabited farm buildings (homes as well as barns and other outbuildings) as seen in the French *fermette*. What is missing is a romanticized notion of what might constitute a life in such a setting. These places are often not truly inhabited in the fullest sense. They are commuter dwellings in bedroom communities, weekend country bolt-holes or holiday homes that may only function seasonally. These dwellings could, though, begin to form the basis for a new style of settlement in the urban fringe and shadow, following the Jeffersonian model of the gentleman farmer and his smallholding, though the ranks of servants may need to be replaced by technology.

It is vital to find a way of inhabiting the urban fringe, a way that people like Armand Debelder and Yves and Kurt Panneels seem to be, that values the association between people, place, food, drink, and landscape, that is based in a moral economy and a delight in the miraculous and spiritual act of dwelling in a mundane and quotidian world. We need to come to live in a multisensual landscape once again. Dolores Hayden compellingly highlights this association between the senses and our inhabitation of the landscape:

> If place does provide an overload of possible meanings for the researcher, it is place's very assault on all ways of knowing (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) that makes it powerful as a source of memory, as a weave where one strand ties in another. Place needs to be at the heart of urban landscape history, not on the margins, because the aesthetic qualities of the natural and built environments, positive and negative, are just as important as the political struggles over space often dealt with by urban historians and social scientists.[18]

Key to imagining a sustainable future for the urban fringe is the reinhabitation of the landscape with people who do so out

of volition or earnest vocation, in the same way that the ideal inhabitation of the city is by people who aspire to city life, rather than those who see it as drudgery. Why not envision a future in which all people do what they love? This may sound utopian, but perhaps only because it is an idea that is at odds with the present industrial and agricultural complex. It also may be queried because it is a dangerous oversimplification to romanticize the nature of life on the land. Nathaniel Hawthorne had his spirit nearly broken shoveling manure on George Ripley's transcendentalist (and later Fourierist) utopian community at Brook Farm, and countless hippies returned from "getting back to nature" to a very earnest "getting back to civilization." To "simplify" or "get back to nature" shows a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between soil, climate, place. It's complex. It's very hard work. There is still value to romanticizing the life of the small farmer or small producer, though, especially if visionaries like Armand Debelder are around to show us what an earnest and satisfying life can be made in a newly reinvented hinterland. It is possible to learn to savor the agony and ecstasy of a textured and flavorful life in the countryside as part of a vibrant community that might show the reemergence of a moral economy. Perhaps all that is needed is that we acquire a taste for it, an educated taste.

Notes

Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, *Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 205.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), xii.

1. R. Wood and J. Ravetz, "Recasting the Urban Fringe," *Landscape Design*, October 2000.

2. Tim Webb, Chris Pollard, and Joris Pattyn, *Lambicland: The World's Most Complex Beers and Simplest Cafes* (Cambridge: Cogan and Mater, 2004), 62.

3. In de Verzekering tegen de Grote Dorst has a website at http://www.dorst.be/en/ that gives directions and their opening hours. It is well worth a visit.

4. Oenology also refers to the making of wine, a field separate from, but related to, viticulture—the science, study, and growing of grapes.

5. UNESCO World Heritage Commission, "Cultural Landscape, History, and Terminology," http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturalland scape/ (accessed January 17, 2009).

6. Webb, Pollard, and Pattyn, *Lambicland*, 6.

7. This atmosphere may be savored at the Cantillon Brewery in Brussels, which is not far from the Gare du Midi. It offers self-guided tours and tastings and it refers to itself as Le Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze/Het Brussels Museum van de Geuze. It is well worth a visit and their beers are first-rate.

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (New York and London: Routledge, 1979), 56.

9. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 6.

10. De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, *Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, *Living and Cooking*, 13.

11. To "bittersweet" and "piquant," we might add sour, sweet, salty, spicy, and so on, as emotions, moods, or descriptors of personality.

12. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1.

13. Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, 1998), 224.

14. Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, 224.

15. Carolyn Steel, *Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008), 7.

16. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 95–96.

17. Steel, *Hungry City*, 8.

18. Dolores Hayden, "Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space," in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, 114 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

Chapter Four

National Tastes

Italy and Food Culture

MATTHEW HIBBERD

Few would doubt the importance of food to Italian national and cultural identity. Food is widely recognized to be a fundamental part of what it means to be Italian. National signature dishes—which actually originated in the Italian cities, regions, or localities—provide many proud Italians with a cause for national celebration. Italian food also constitutes a key feature of global food culture. The development of international food chains selling pizza or pasta ensures that people across the globe recognize Italy as one of the world's great food nations. But as much as we recognize the importance of Italian cuisine in today's globalized world, food has not always held such importance to Italians, and for many years after the birth of the Italian nation-state, in 1861, food was not considered an essential feature of Italian cultural life. In this essay, I will look at the development of the Italian nation-state, linking this to the key advances in Italian food cuisine. Only in the past sixty years has Italy developed a fully-fledged national food cuisine aided by a period of sustained economic growth in the post Second World War years. The so-called economic miracle of the 1950s and 1960s, especially, saw mass migration from south to