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# Evaluating a Cuisine: Six Criteria

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**Abstract**
Defining what makes up "a cuisine" involves finding a way to evaluate what makes it "distinctly unique and meritable." In this first of a two-part series, the author develops six criteria which can be used in such an evaluative process.

**Keywords**
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# Evaluating A Cuisine: Six Criteria

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*Defining what makes up "a cuisine" involves finding a way to evaluate what makes it "distinctly unique and meritable." In this first of a two-part series, the author develops six criteria which can be used in such an evaluative process.*

Any attempt to evaluate a cuisine raises the problem of deciding, first of all, what a cuisine is. It is said that our country has no cuisine, but only styles of cooking, such as Creole foods in the Cajun area; Pennsylvania Dutch cooking, which blends the cookery of the old and new worlds; and Southern cookery with its barbecues, fried chicken, cornbread, hush puppies, mustard greens, chitterlings, and other typical foods.

On the other hand, the French are said to have a national cuisine, but it too has styles of cooking: the butter base cooking of Normandy and the north, the olive oil cooking of southern France, and the lard and goose grease style of eastern France. Why does France have a cuisine, then, and we do not? There must be some common denominator that joins styles of cooking into one distinctive cuisine. What is it?

A search to find the answer in the literature is not very helpful. Grimrod Reynold, Alexander Dumas, Brillat Savarine, and other great gourmet writers of the past have much praise for many dishes they enjoyed, but they never get around to saying what makes a cuisine great. If they did have any opinions, they are more elaborative, subjective, and philosophic than definitive or objective. They speak expansively and emotionally about what good food should be and about dishes that are the epitome in palate satisfaction, but they never say what a great cuisine is.

The same is true of the great chefs such as Careme and Escoffier who devote their writings more to a discussion of techniques, fine recipes, and culinary experiences than to a definition of what makes any system of food production or dining great. Nor are our modern writers of much help. Beard and others do a combination of the past gourmets and chefs laced with some modern ideas about what good food is, but never come up with any definitive statement of what a cuisine is or what makes it great.



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## Cuisine Can Be Defined

This is a frustrating situation, forcing one to come up with a definition: "A cuisine is a definable, distinctly unique, and meritable pattern of food preparation common to a culture." This is modest and limited, but explanative enlargement will make it more meaningful and complete.

One more thing is needed: a set of criteria which can be used to evaluate a cuisine. The literature is not helpful and one is forced to establish one's own set. After much consideration, six factors have been selected as most useful in making such an evaluation:

- the nature, extent, and level of the social and economic structure of the culture itself,
- the variety and kinds of food and dishes used in the cuisine,
- the methods of cooking and other technical factors distinguishing the cuisine,
- the personnel used to produce the food and their training,
- the kind of service used, and
- the cultural beliefs, philosophy, and other factors that lead to an appreciation of the cuisine among the people who consume it.

Some explanation of these six criteria is necessary to show how they can be used as standards for evaluating a cuisine.

## Cuisine Evolves Along With Culture

A cuisine does not suddenly appear out of the ground; it evolves along with a total cultural development of a people. Many forces shape this cuisine and make it what it is. One is the extent of the culture; it must have well-defined boundaries and cover a fairly large geographic area and number of people. The level of the culture must also be considered. A cuisine of any significance can hardly rise in a primitive civilization; necessary factors for its support would not be there. Also, an important cuisine could not come from a population living at the bare subsistence level.

The cuisine must be an integral and highly characteristic part of the culture. It must be historically explainable in its growth and traceable in its development. It should have wide horizontal spread and not have spotty, regional acceptance. It should also have deep vertical spread through all classes of the culture. A cuisine having the support of only the upper classes would lack true importance.

The living standards of the culture should be high and the culture should also have significant levels of art. The cuisine must be highly suitable and flexible to the needs of the culture, supporting social, economic, religious, and other activities of the society. And, lastly, the cuisine must have unique characteristics that make it distinctive to that culture and no other.

## A Variety Of Foods Is Necessary

A study of the foods used in the preparation of its dishes has relativity in an evaluation of a cuisine. These foods are usually specific to the cuisine and give an indication of its nature. For a cuisine to assume importance, a wide variety of foods should be used in its



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preparation; otherwise the cuisine lacks originality. The foods have to be specific and unique to the cuisine and should possess a uniqueness of their own. If a cuisine is to have distinctive dishes that stand out, the attributes of the foods used must be carefully considered.

Typical foods distinguishing a cuisine would be the pastas of Italy, the curries of India, the black beans and rice of Mexican food, or the wide use of the potato in many dishes in Polish foods. Uniqueness would be the use of blood or entrails in Chinese dishes, truffles and other fungi in French cookery, or raw fish in Japanese meals. They should not be used in a garish, extravagant manner, but so as to enhance the originality and special nature of the food. Cultures eat differently and what one finds revolting the other finds highly acceptable; one should, therefore, not condemn based on one's own likes and dislikes, but should recognize the differences between cultural foods.

In any scrutiny of foods used in a cuisine, note should also be taken of how they are grown, processed, preserved, harvested, marketed, and handled. These factors can often tell much about the level of a cuisine.

Regional differences in the kinds of foods used should be expected. The three styles of fat cooking of France have been mentioned. The wide use of the tomato in southern Italian dishes contrasts markedly with sauces made without tomatoes in northern Italy. But there should be a commonality that covers all the foods of the culture. China is often said to have six or seven regional styles of cooking, but there are so many common elements unique to all Chinese cooking that they blend into one. This has to be true of any cuisine. Perhaps that is the reason why it is said that the U.S. does not have a cuisine, but only styles of cooking. There is little commonality among the styles.

Seasonality should be noted in the dishes since this can indicate the level of a cuisine. It should be distinctive, producing a wide variety of dishes, regardless of the season. Also, the wide list of foods used should come largely from the geographic area itself. This would have to be the case if the cuisine grew out of the culture.

### Cuisine Requires Skill, Knowledge

A cuisine should have dishes that require a great amount of professional skill and knowledge to prepare. The delicate and intricate sauces of French cooking or the marvelous chocolate pastries of the Swiss or the crisp flakiness of a Bavarian strudel indicate the skill and ability of a master. No cuisine could boast of such delicacies if it lacked personnel of high competency to produce them.

The dishes should also give character and identity to the cuisine. The origins of these dishes should be noted. Some will have embryonic beginnings in the more common foods of the culture, while others may involve "borrowing" from other cultures to make something so distinctive that it has an originality of its own. Who would ever suspect that the delicate sponge cake so widely thought endemic to British cuisine actually came from the Spanish cooks Queen Mary brought back with her when she left Spain and came home to England, disgusted at Philip



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II's inattention to her?

The names of dishes often betray their origins, such as *a la bonne femme* or *a la chasseur*. Innovators of famous dishes will frequently have their names attached to the food names; French cuisine includes Mornay, Bechamel, Henry IV, Du Barry, and others. (While the names of Count Mornay or Bechamel, King Henry IV or Madame De Barry grace these dishes or items, usually the originator was the chef in employment who never got the credit.) Borrowings from other cuisines should be studied to see the extent of change and also how well the modification went with the dish. No evaluation of Russian cuisine can be made without noting its debt to French cookery and how significantly it was changed to suit Russian tastes and food resources.

The word "meritable" was used in the definition of a cuisine because some evaluation of worth or quality is required. While merit should cover more than quality, primary emphasis should be given to the quality or palate-satisfying nature of the food. The subtlety with which flavor, color, form, temperature, and texture are blended into a dish is an important factor in the evaluation of a dish and, therefore, a cuisine. The variation of these factors is also of interest. Contrasting or complementary flavors, form, colors, temperatures, and textures should be handled with finesse and delicacy.

Any cuisine of note will have developed a large number of terms and a language used to describe dishes, preparation methods, service methods, and other factors that give it distinction. The Chinese and French both named dishes after individuals, places, ingredients used, preparation method, appearance, or just plain fancy. A Lion's Head was a Chinese meatball that looked just that way; Eight Precious Rice was made of eight special ingredients and Drunken Chicken was cold chicken soaked in rice wine. Count Bechamel graced France's Bechamel Sauce with his name; Canard Montemorency was duck cooked with Montemorency (a French count) cherries and *Souffle aux Fraises* was a strawberry souffle, the French verb *souffler* meaning "to blow," indicating the lightness caused by air beaten into the egg whites for the souffle. Such terms and designations dressed up the dishes and gave them some interest as well as a distinct identity.

No dish can be prepared without the use of specific tools, equipment or other accoutrements, and each cuisine will have its own. These should be noted; any knowing individual can walk into a kitchen and immediately know the kind of foods produced there. The French kitchen will have special whips, pans, knives, and other items needed to produce French dishes. It would be difficult to produce a Hawaiian luau in it. The pasta machine in the Italian kitchen is a dead giveaway. The traditional nature of any cuisine is clearly evident in the makeup of the kitchen.

A cuisine of significance also uses a wide variety of preparation methods in the creation of its dishes and, depending upon the complexity of these methods, the skill required to perform them, and the artistry with which they are done, the nature of a cuisine can also be judged. A delicate, light, crisp croissant results from the application of complex and skillful manipulations which, if not used, result



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in a product of lesser quality. Proper methods are also required if products are to come out not only as highly gustatory achievements but also as examples of artistic skill. Thus, the level and nature of the methods used is a most revealing factor in indicating the level of the cuisine itself. The uniqueness of the production procedures and how typical they are of a specific cuisine must also be evaluated.

### Personnel Must Be Evaluated

Closely associated with the factor of methods but in a separate category for evaluation is the study of those who work in producing and serving food. These individuals may not be professional staff, but they usually are, and the degree of professionalism of their performance is an important criterion in judging a cuisine. A true cuisine can exist as it is prepared in the home, but most are based on the performance of professional personnel who, working in an establishment, often receive formal training or one that is organized on the job. Servants and others in the home who produce food qualifying as a cuisine get their skills and knowledge from others or learn by experience. Professional cooks also learn much by experience and add it to the knowledge of the cuisine. The contributions of Escoffier, who was a great scientist as well as artist, are an example of this.

A worthwhile cuisine results when there is a sound, solid base of knowledge of its production and service and when this knowledge is applied as an art. Workers must have this to produce the level of foods demanded by the cuisine. If they do not, the cuisine fails. Specific jobs require specific learning and talents. A fine sugar worker has a craft that requires great knowledge and skill in the preparation and manipulation of the products prepared. A great deal of study, experience, and application is required to perform properly the functions of this craft. The depth and complexity of the professional knowledge and skill required for the attainment of the master designation in a specific area of the cuisine must be evaluated.

Any cuisine will have an organizational body in which individuals do special preparations and share the work. Some cuisines have very complex organizations. The degree of complexity and division should be considered in evaluating the cuisine. Perhaps the French have the most complex with the executive chef, *sous chef, chefs de partie,* etc. The same is true of the French organization of the dining area with the *maitre d'hotel,* captains, *chefs du rang, commis du rang,* and others in the service staff.

### Some Service Structures Are Elaborate

No cuisine ends with its production in the kitchen; it must be served and consumed. Some require elaborate service structures with many courses and many foods and beverages brought together in a formalized fashion. Other cuisines have less formalized service procedures, but they may be quite distinctive. Elaborateness and formalization are not necessarily positive factors; overdoing it can be negative. However, they often reveal much of the nature of the cuisine.

In any service evaluation one should note the special sequence of



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dishes and courses since these reveal how the diner is developing taste and appreciation. The progression should be suitable to the human palate as was most carefully detailed by Brillat Savarin or other gourmets.

A special sequence and kind of dishes and courses will usually be established. Special serving dishes, dishes for dining, eating utensils, glassware, and other items are required. Their placement and use is important to the propriety of the meal. Specific kinds of service such as French, Russian, English, or American have specific patterns of service. An eight-course French formal meal will normally have the appetizer, soup, fish, fowl, main entree, salad, cheese, and dessert served in that order. These must be balanced to result in a unified whole but also to achieve an artistic effect in each separate course. Other cultures may have different sequences, but all must have logic and utility. A meal without such formalized presentation becomes a hodge-podge of random foods and lacks the total achievement a meal must have.

An adequate cuisine needs fine dining in which proper forms of etiquette are followed according to the cultural patterns. There should be a proper order of seating and treatment of guests; the latter also have obligations of conduct and decorum. Good eating habits, as dictated by the culture, must be followed. If this means scooping up food with the hand, so be it. Some cuisines have formal rules of etiquette while others do not. Evaluation of the rule should consider the meaning behind it. Again, elaborateness and formality are not necessarily positive factors. They can be overdone, but a proper level of etiquette is required to raise a cuisine to a meritable level

To be appreciated an art must have an audience. Any cuisine must have diners adequate to judge the quality and value of the foods being consumed. Such an audience often has the resources and leisure to devote time to learning and appreciating the properties of a cuisine. An audience of this type promotes and nurtures the growth of a cuisine until it arrives at a high excellence. Without such attention, a cuisine dies. The level of understanding and knowledge and appreciation of what the cuisine is serves as an indicator of the level of the cuisine.

### Dining Requires Intellectual Response

Dining is more than a sensual, gut-satisfying experience. It requires an intellectual response which raises it above just animal appetite satisfaction. Fine dining can be as rewarding an artistic enjoyment as listening to a symphony, seeing a great play, or enjoying a fine painting. The French used a meal as a progression of fine gustatory experiences which rose to a climax at the entree and then regressed until the appetite was satisfied with the dessert. Fine dining can have meaning in being able to create harmony and satisfaction in a vital living function. A cuisine can be evaluated to the degree it produces an intellectual response of a high nature.

Since a cuisine must rise out of a culture, it must be highly representative of the beliefs and mores existing in that society. Food often possesses semantic meaning which can express ideas better than



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words. It can express how people feel about their lives and the world about them. It can indicate subtle observances of etiquette and meaning in life's processes. When the Chinese bridegroom sent a roast pig to the bride's parents the morning after the nuptial night, there was great rejoicing in the bride's household. It meant that she was indeed a virgin and would make a good wife. No Arab would ever eat the roasted eye of the lamb or goat without offering the other to the guest of honor. The eye is considered the greatest of delicacies, and offering it to the guest is considered a ritualistic part of the meal in giving honor. Any real southern American who does not eat black-eyed peas on January 1 will be plagued with trouble during the entire year. The drinking of wine at the Jewish circumcision or the sacrifice of wine and bread at the holy sacrifice at church have deep meaning.

Perhaps the most heavily-weighted factor in the evaluation of any cuisine should be in this area of philosophic meaning. Without considerable depth, a cuisine cannot be considered great. It raises the cuisine from the animal level to the human level, from the belly to the mind.

## Note

**This is the first in a two-part series. In the second article, the author will compare the great French cuisine, frequently called "continental cuisine," with the lesser-known Chinese cuisine to ascertain how each ranks using the six criteria of a cuisine discussed in this article.**



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