

French and Chinese Cuisines: An Evaluation

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This is the second of a two-part series on an evaluation of cuisines. The author establishes standards for cuisine which determine that Chinese food is superior to French.

Ever since the Golden Era of Cuisine, the century between the great chefs Careme and Escoffier, the French classical cookery, which is often called “continental” cuisine, has been held up as the epitome of great food and fine dining. French chefs have been eagerly sought to work in the best of food services, and menus have featured French dishes. No other cuisine has been given such universal acceptance or homage.

Because of the dominance of French cookery and dining, other cuisines have never quite reached their true level of appreciation and worth as an order of cookery. An example of this is Chinese cuisine. While it is highly regarded and growing in popularity, it has often been thought of as an odd style of cooking and dining. Could such a cuisine ever dare to be compared to the great French classical cuisine? It might be of interest to make such a comparison.

In a previous article, a cuisine was denoted as “a definable, distinctly unique food pattern of meritable food preparation and dining common to a culture,” and six factors — the culture, the kinds of foods used, the type of dishes and methods used to prepare them, the personnel producing and serving this cuisine, the kind of service, and the philosophic and other beliefs of the culture underlying the cuisine — were considered pertinent to any evaluation of a cuisine. This, then, can be the base by which the comparison and evaluation is made.

First, it might be well to indicate that while China does have seven or more regional styles of cooking, there is a broad commonality which makes them all one kind of cuisine. Chinese food preparation methods are simple and fast. The wok and other utensils are universally used. The stir-fry method is common to all seven styles. Many foods are the same. Bean curd and its derivatives are used throughout. Either rice or wheat (noodles, dumplings, buns, and others) are the base of the meal. Tea is the common drink; the alcoholic beverage is a “wine” made from cereal. Parallel methods of dining are used throughout all regions. The chopstick and the rice bowl (noodle in the north) are common dining instruments. Modes of dining and serving etiquette are univer-

sal. Because of these and many other parallels it would be difficult to argue that China is a land of seven styles of cooking and no national cuisine. It is basically one divided into seven different styles as modified by geographic, economic, ethnic, and other differences.

A View Of The Culture Is Important

The first standard applied to a cuisine is a look at the culture, which is the oldest, continuous living one in the world. Its empire period ranged from 23,000 B.C. to 1919 A.D. China's present method of cooking and dining developed far back in its prehistoric days. The oven, the wok, the kinds of foods, the methods of preparation, and other characteristic factors were a traditional part of the cuisine when records of history were first made. Thus, it is historically explainable and is venerable.

This can be contrasted with the cuisine of France which did not really begin until the middle of the 18th century A.D., about 25,000 years after Chinese cuisine started its growth. French cuisine was really not a product of France but of Florence, Italy. When Catherine de Medici came to France as the bride of Henry II, Henry's kitchen and dining were rough, almost barbaric. They cooked using the spit and fireplace. The main dish was a stew consisting of meat, vegetables, and broth put into tranchards; the diner speared and cut the large objects of food with a dagger or sharp knife. The broth was then sopped up with bread.

There were no eating utensils; the hand was often the scoop which got the last bit into the mouth. Catherine brought knives, forks, and spoons with her from Florence and taught the crude Frenchmen to eat with them. She introduced plates and other dining dishes, as well. She was shocked by the standards of the food as well and set about to do something about it. She had brought many fine cooks with her and soon Henry's table was graced with beautifully cooked main dishes, vegetables, delicate pastries, and fine wines.

It was a dramatic change welcomed by the court and France's nobility. Some other households were copying the royal table and the development of a great cuisine in France was underway. When Henry IV came to the throne, France found it had a patron of dining. As Henry II's nephew he had been in the court and was charmed by his aunt Catherine and her table. He was a true gourmet and set the chart once and for all for France's growth toward one of the world's great cuisines.

By this time the development had come to maturity and France had one of the greatest cuisines the world had ever known. However, its one defect was that it was only practiced by the upper classes. The French Revolution corrected this. With the beginning of the restaurant with Boulanger, who started a food service operation as a "restorer" of health (*restaurer*, French verb to "restore") just before the Revolution, the development of a French cuisine with the middle classes came about, especially after the Revolution when impoverished nobility opened their homes with their fine staff of cooks and servants to serve the classical cuisine to the dominant middle class.

However, this cuisine never reached the lower classes, although some dishes, as indicated by *la bonne femme*, *la chasseur*, and others

did come upward into the cuisine. In contrast, China's cuisine was common throughout all classes. The emperor ate the better cuts of meat and perhaps finer foods, but basically his meal was built upon the same foods and methods of preparation as those used in the peasant homes. The Chinese economy was based on agriculture; all Chinese were closely attached to the soil. The wealthy, the scholarly, the elite, the nobility, and even the emperor all knew their origins were from this source and, if they did not, a revolution by the peasantry and other dissatisfied Chinese could enforce the idea. When China's cuisine was formed, *fan* or cereal was the most important food — Confucius soundly preached that it was. Ts'ai foods, which were meat, vegetable, or fruit dishes, were complementary to *fan*.

Meat was largely used as a seasoning and remained this way throughout Chinese history. People who ate a lot of meat were barbarians; these included the wild Huns, Tartans, Jurchens, and others in the north. The proper man ate several bowls of rice or noodles with a few chopsticks of meat and vegetables. No other population ever fed itself better than the Chinese until China after the 18th century began to exceed the ability to produce for its surging population and great famines resulted.

If one were scoring, on the scale of 1 to 10, the ability to represent a culture, French food would perhaps score 6 and Chinese food more than 9.

China Can Grow Most Foods

China does well also when we look at the list of foods used in the cuisine. China is a land of unmatched range of climatic and geographic conditions and can grow almost any kind of food. The Chinese were adept at finding ways to preserve these foods so that even in distant inland areas delicacies of the sea were available, and tropical fruits could be secured from the remote areas of the north and far west.

The various styles of cooking are based on these quite different resources of food. The rice of the south and the wheat of the north make one vast area difference. The tropical conditions of South China, along with the vast seacoast, account for the wide use of fish and shellfish and tropical fruits in the mildly-flavored Cantonese cooking. Hakka, Fukien, and Shanghai or Shantung cooking also reflect seacoast resources mingled with specialties of their agriculture. Mandarin cooking of the north reflects the influence of the royal court and the northern Mongolian and other peoples. It is hotter and spicier than the others. The Mongol pot and many grilled meat dishes reflect the more plentiful meat supply coming from the northern grazing lands.

Hunan, Yunnan, and Szechuan are inland provinces that have their own distinctive styles of cooking. The pork and cured meats of Hunan are famous. Szechuan's love of hot spicy food is duplicated also in Hunan and Yunnan to some extent. All have a plentiful supply of fresh water fish and shellfish and the southern areas have a semi-tropical climate favorable to the growing of citrus fruits and other plants that like that kind of climate.

Certain religious and cultural groups also bring variety and differ-

ence to Chinese cuisine. The Hakka peoples, called the “gypsies of China,” have their own cultural patterns and live quite apart from the rest. They have their own dishes and preferences in foods and emphasize more than any other Chinese style of cooking the use of animal, fowl, and fish innards. Precipitated, congealed blood is also used extensively. Even their tea is different. They are fond of a very heavy, black, aromatic tea. The Buddhists have also introduced many different dishes to the Chinese cuisine. They are non-meat eaters and so have become adept in using wheat gluten, bean curd, and other non-meat products in dishes that taste very much like the meat they omit. They also have introduced many different kinds of vegetable dishes into the Chinese style of cooking.

Taiwan cooking is a style all of its own representing perhaps a composite of many cooking styles of China brought over in different migrations from the mainland, the last being when the Communists took over the mainland after World War II. Mingled in this island’s cooking are also traces of the Spanish from the Philippines, the Dutch from their possession of the island for a time, and the Japanese from their period of possession. The vast resources of the sea give a heavy touch of seafood and fish in the Taiwanese diet.

The wide number of cooking styles and of different kinds of foods available to the Chinese enlarges the scope of dishes that can be produced. The Chinese with great ingenuity and skill have compounded this into perhaps the largest number of different dishes that any cuisine can boast. Also, they use these foods in a manner which is so specific to the Chinese cuisine that one cannot make a mistake in knowing from where they came.

The French were also adept at using a wide group of foods and in making the most of their geographic and climatic differences to produce a good variety. The three styles of French cooking are largely based on the kind of fat available. Northern France, especially Normandy, has vast amounts of butter which is used liberally in its cooking. The climate is too rigorous for the olive tree and, while lard is used, butter is the main fat. Normandy also has a long seacoast; a large quantity of fish and shellfish is featured in its dishes. Chicken is also prominent, as are hardy fruits and vegetables.

As one progresses south, the climate is less rigorous and olive trees mark the area. Citrus fruits and even bananas may be found as a part of many dishes. West France is influenced heavily in its cuisine by the Germans. Pork lard and goose grease are prominent in the Alsace. The French as a whole make wide use of snails, truffles, mushrooms and other fungi, sweetbreads, brains, and other non-common items. Veal is also popular. French cuisine emphasizes meat, fowl, seafood, and fish more than the Chinese.

The French have fewer food resources than the Chinese partly because they do not have the range of climate and also because they do not have the land space China has. They have made up for this, however, by introducing a wide variety of preparation. The French have also been ingenious in their ability to make what are called “master” or “mother” sauces and then developing from these a vast

number of “minor” sauces. Their uses of rich stocks to enliven their dishes also have been highly creative and original.

On the basis of the greater variety of foods in Chinese cooking which French cookery partially makes up for with a greater number of dishes from a lesser supply of foods, the scoring would go 8.5 for Chinese cooking and 8 for French.

Chinese Methods Are Simple

The Chinese kitchen is a simple affair. The cooking equipment will be a steaming section, a cooking section in which the wok is used almost exclusively, perhaps a broiling section, and a roasting oven which usually is outside in the courtyards so the smoke is no problem. A preparation section, which can also be outside, will be needed. A long table separates the steaming section and wok section from the waiters; on the other side from the cooking will be a preparer who takes the order from the waiters or waitresses, assembles the ingredients and the dishes for service, and gets things ready for the cooks.

The utensils and tools are also simple. The wok is the workhorse. In it they can steam — usually separate, tiered bamboo steamers are used — stir-fry, deep fry, poach, or even make soup. A sieve, ladles, and chopsticks are used to manipulate food in the wok. A thin, intensely sharp cleaver is used for cutting up foods; the Chinese become very adept in its use. Two cleavers may be used, one in each hand, for staccato or fine chopping, a process in which the cleavers are alternately raised and lowered at a furious pace, mincing food more finely than it can be ground. The fire-pot (Mongol pot) and the solid griddle are used in northern cooking. The Chinese have a cooking pot which they bury in hot coals to braise foods for a long time. Sometimes they bake foods in a clay wrap as in Beggar’s Chicken.

The order of work is also simple. Roasted and steamed meats will be cooked for a long time, but most food preparation is to order with foods being cooked at an intensely hot heat while being tossed in the wok, a method called stir-frying.

The Chinese are masters in bringing out a blend of flavors in food. They often use preliminary flavor incorporation such as soaking in a marinade. They also do some basic cooking such as parboiling, boiling, frying, etc. They then combine this pretreated food with other foods and develop what they call an “explosion” of flavor in a fast, furious stir-fry, which is just long enough to partially cook the food and bring out the subtle combination of flavors. The Chinese sometimes use rich stocks to enhance the flavor of their foods. Wine and many different seasonings are used to give special flavors. Few Chinese foods are served raw. If a cold food is served, which can be often, the food is first cooked and then cooled for service.

French Kitchens Are More Elaborate

The French kitchen is a much more elaborate one than the Chinese. It will be divided into a number of production units, each of which has a lot of equipment and tools and utensils. These will be for highly specialized purposes. The French go into many different and more intricate preparations than do the Chinese, although when it comes to deco-

ration and artistic food presentation, the Chinese do very well. While Chinese cooking is basically a last minute preparation, the French have a three-step, spread-out process: much preparation, partial preparation, and final finishing. They will make much greater use of sauces and other foods to complement the main food. They also do not blend foods together as much as the Chinese do. Foods will be served separately, that is, meat and sauce or potato and vegetable with something else as an accompaniment. The French also do not blend methods of cooking as much as the Chinese do. The Chinese cross-cooking or the use of one cooking method followed by another and then perhaps by another is practiced less frequently.

It would be hard, however, to say that the French use more skill or knowledge in the preparation of their dishes, although many French dishes can only be prepared in a proper manner by masters in the science and art of cookery. Some of the methods the Chinese use are as intricate, complex, and demanding as any of those used by the French. Perhaps one could say the French just use more of them; they also divide jobs up between different personnel much more than do the Chinese. The Chinese cook is almost a jack-of-all-trades who must be able to do almost any job done in the kitchen. High specialization is characteristic of the work in the French kitchen, especially at the final cooking or baking levels.

For scoring, perhaps the French win this one with a 8.5, while the Chinese score a 7.5

Kitchen Organizations Differ

The French have developed a complete and complex system of training for kitchen and waiting jobs. Both the kitchen and the dining area have well-established organizations. A thorough and long period of training must occur before one can move from one position to a higher one. Specific prestige and authority go with each position as one climbs up the hierarchical ladder.

The French have also a well-organized system of recipes and laws of cooking and baking which have been established from the experience of a number of centuries. Many of the French chefs wrote elaborately on the theory of cooking and, while they did not establish this in scientific terms of today, many were astute and exacting scientists who saw phenomena and correctly interpreted them from cause to effect. Much of this was written down so it would be available for those who would follow.

The Chinese have a completely different system of kitchen organization. There is one leader or head cook and everyone is sort of indentured to him. If he leaves, all will leave. He is a sort of tong leader. Often, many working for the head cook will be family members, and strong bonds will exist between them. There is also little formal training. The Chinese have no schools for cooks or chefs. One learns to cook by working at it, but there is nothing so formalized as that of the French kitchen where one starts as an apprentice, then goes to a journeyman (*chef de partie*), and then to master, which would be the *sous chef* or executive chef. The same thing is true in the training and organiza-

tion of those who work in the dining room. There is one head and training is on-the-job. Learning in the Chinese kitchen and dining room comes with working.

The Chinese also wrote nothing down. All recipes are learned and passed down this way to those who follow. While it is true the Chinese wrote much about food, these tracts were discussions about the health qualities of foods or a philosophic discussion of the meaning and purpose of food in life.

However, one must not think the Chinese method of training and organization was loose and unsystematized. It was anything but. The training was rigorous and thorough, and one did not get a job until one demonstrated a capability of doing it well. Without this the delicate, flavorful, and beautifully appearing dishes could never be prepared. The difference between the personnel of the two cuisines was that the French were given a more formal and scientific training than the Chinese, but the end result was much the same — a true capability to produce marvelous foods.

Thus, on a score of 10, the French should get an 8.5 and the Chinese a 7.

Chinese Dining Is More Complicated

A French meal usually consists of a series of courses in which the appetite is first stimulated, then satisfied and then stopped. It is very scientifically done and was arrived at only after long experimentation by the world's top gourmets. They use many different kinds of eating utensils and dishes. There are strict rules of service. Strictly French service would be that which is served from the *queridon* in which the final preparation occurs in front of the guests. Rules exist as to how foods are put down, how dishes are removed, how the table is set, how the wine is served, what kind of glass is used, who is served first, and who is served last. It is very formal and structured.

Guests at a French meal were supposed to follow certain rules of etiquette, with ladies seated at the right of male companions. Men seated the ladies. There were set ways to handle one's eating utensils and a proper way to eat certain kinds of foods. Toasts were to be given in a certain way.

The Chinese had a very different system. They had courses but they were often served together in groups. Foods were dished into serving dishes and placed in the middle of the table. Chopsticks were about the only eating utensil except for a curved soup spoon. Foods were taken from the center of the table by the use of chopsticks and placed on a tiny plate in front of the diner. A rice bowl was at the right. Food would be placed on top of the rice and the bowl raised to the lips; then with the chopsticks the food could be lifted to the lips where a piece would be bitten off. Some rice would then be shoveled in with the chopsticks and the bowl set down.

Chinese foods were most often cut into bite-sized pieces so they could be handled by the chopsticks without further cutting. Some finger foods were used, such as when Peking duck was served in the small crepe. As many as three soups were served during a meal, one of which was

often sweet and ended the meal. The Chinese went less for desserts than did the French and their desserts were usually much more simple.

There was a strict place setting for a meal and certain foods had to come at certain times during the meal. In the northern meal, the *fan* or cereal came during the middle part, while in the south the rice (almost universally used as the *fan*) came near the end of the meal. In the southern Chinese fish was usually the last course because the same syllable used for fish with a slightly different intonation meant "completion" or "end." A Chinese formal meal usually went to 12 courses, but sometimes in very formal occasions there could be more. Meals also could last for several days with resting and other activities occurring between dining periods.

The Chinese had even stricter rules for dining than did the French. Guests were never seated with a door at their back — to do so was an insult. There was a proper place for the host to sit — the east side — with the honored guest opposite on the west side. Much formality went on from the start to the end of the meal. Women were usually not permitted to eat at the formal occasions. There was often entertainment. The kind of food served and the manner in which it was offered and consumed also had very special meaning in Chinese etiquette. One could give grave insult or the highest compliment in these actions. Tea and wine drinking were times for great ceremony. The French had perhaps the advantage over the Chinese in dining. The French therefore deserve an 8.5 while the Chinese deserve a 6.5, their very strict rules of etiquette overdoing this part a bit.

Meals Had Philosophical Meaning

The Chinese made food and dining an internal part of the fabric of their culture. Food was medicine and medicine food because both nurtured the body. Food was very much a part of their religion; it was also much of a part of the ceremony of a family coming together to do their annual ancestor worship. Special foods were consumed; others were offered to the ancestors at the family altar and at the burial site. Food was also an important part of almost all Chinese public and private ceremonies. When consumed, certain foods indicated certain thoughts, reverence, and worship. The Buddhists and Taoists had strict dietary rules which had to be followed if one was to properly practice the religion.

At festivals specific foods were consumed. The moon cakes at the moon festival in autumn were an example or the red rice balls in the south or red dumplings in the north at New Years. The Chinese wove into their foods a great amount of semantics. A bowl of tiny noodles in a delicate broth eaten with a good friend just before a journey was a way of saying how much the parting and separation would mean. A young mother who just gave birth to a son was served drunken chicken (cold boiled chicken soaked in wine) by the happy husband.

The Chinese made a part of their religion the belief in opposites, the Yin and Yang, female and male, winter and summer, night and day, bad and good, and they carried this over to their foods. There were some foods that made the body hot, and hot foods had to be balanced

with those that made the body cool. These rules, along with those set forth by Confucius and others for the consumption of *FAN* and *ts'ai* at meals, seem somewhat strange to us today, but they actually developed a set of dietary rules that worked out to be almost the one nutritionists would recommend today as the normal diet.

The French had a different view of food. It was important for life; they knew of this importance but food was more than something just to sustain life. It was to be enjoyed, and eating became to many Frenchmen one of life's great pleasures and occupations. They often ate for the sensual pleasure of dining, for the enjoyment of the fine flavors of food and the pleasure of the company of those with whom they were dining.

Food never carried with it the religious meaning the Chinese attached to it. Only a few foods had any religious meaning. Food also never carried with it the meaning of health and longevity that it did for the Chinese. In fact, many in poor health because of overeating did not realize it. The French also had far less semantics attached to food. It was something to be enjoyed, and that was as far as they wanted to carry it. Thus, food was one of life's sensual pleasures to be enjoyed at set times during the day, and for the rest of the day forgotten until hunger roused the appetite again; then the pleasure could be repeated. One must not think that this was carried to a gross and coarse activity by most French. It was by some, but only the gourmand (overeater) and those who lived for pleasure. The average Frenchman knew restraints, but food still was never to have the cultural meaning it had with the Chinese.

On the scale of 10, the Chinese win easily here with a 9, while the French get only a 6.5.

Scores Are Summed

Where does this bring us? The following is a summary of the scoring:

	French	Chinese
Culture	6.0	9.0 +
Foods	8.0	8.5
Dishes and Methods	8.5	7.5
Personnel	8.5	7.0
Dining	8.5	6.5
Philosophy	<u>6.5</u>	<u>9.0</u>
Total	46.0	47.5+

Some may disagree that Chinese cuisine should be ranked higher than the French, since French cuisine has for years been thought of as the finest in the world. Now, when criteria are established for certain standards and an evaluation is made, Chinese cuisine comes out ahead. Perhaps the criteria selected were not correct or perhaps the scoring is not what one would think it should be. However, even if this was changed in any way, Chinese food would still have to come out fairly well.

To those who know Chinese food and the Chinese culture, it is no surprise. The Chinese had for centuries the highest culture in the world.

- presentation of the services and advantages of the particular company, business, etc., to the public;
- facilitation of favorable relationships between the public and the industry or business to earn acceptance and action to benefit the business.

PR Specialists Can Help The Industry

Education in public relations involves producing trained communication specialists with a major in public relations. In a majority of schools and departments of journalism/communications, students are required to select a minor or area of concentration in addition to the major. In colleges and universities where there are schools of hospitality management or hotel, food and travel, a natural cooperative venture would be to offer a minor or area of concentration in travel and tourism for public relations majors.

This is precisely what has been worked out at Florida International University between the Department of Communication and the School of Hospitality Management, working in conjunction with a subcommittee of the Miami Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Miami's location as a major travel and tourism destination, as a crossroads to Latin and South America, as the world's largest cruise center, as an important international air link joining three continents, and as a world-renowned resort center provided the impetus for the Miami Chapter of PRSA to encourage such a program at FIU.

According to Julie Simon, former public relations director at the Fontainebleau Hilton on Miami Beach and a member of the PRSA subcommittee, "In a survey of the 11,000 PRSA members listed in the 1984 directory, more than 400 were engaged in public relations in the travel and tourism area."

It is evident that an increasing number of hospitality businesses throughout the country have been hiring public relations professionals; therefore, in 1984 PRSA established a travel and tourism section of the society to deal with the special needs of practitioners working in the field. Since the section became a reality, Simon said that many non-members expressed an interest in joining PRSA because they are trained professionals in travel and tourism and now see an area of affiliation and networking with others doing similar work across the country. Simon herself started a public relations agency in Miami to deal solely with travel and tourism accounts.

Model Program Can Be Duplicated

FIU's program can serve as a model for other educational institutions. In addition to the 30-33 semester hours of communications courses required for the public relations major, students take a core of 15 semester hours in the hospitality field. Three courses are required: Marketing Strategy I and II and Fundamentals of Tourism. Students must then select two of the following: International Travel and Tourism, Sociology of Leisure, Convention and Trade Show Management, and Hospitality Sales Management.

This series of courses provides basic experience in hospitality marketing and management, as well as opportunities for specialized knowledge in convention and trade shows and international tourism.

The public relations graduate thus has the background to move into a position of responsibility in any of the myriad parts of the hospitality industry. The number of job possibilities is immense; there are 2,000-3,000 travel and tourism-related corporations of all sizes large enough to need skilled public relations specialists. This number includes, among others, 364 hotel corporations (those with multiple units), more than 20 airline trunk carriers, more than a dozen cruise lines and hundreds of food service corporations; many of these are listed in Fortune 500.

In addition, an increasing number of individuals are filling public relations jobs in the hospitality industry:

- at major hotel corporate headquarters, including Hilton, Hyatt, and Sheraton;
- at major independent resort properties;
- at cruise line offices;
- at public relations agencies which handle major tourism accounts;
- at city, county, and state tourism agencies;
- at public relations agencies which specialize only in the travel and tourism areas.

Travel and tourism is a big national — and international — business, and a very competitive one. Trained public relations professionals with a solid understanding of the industry can insure even more success in corporate marketing and promotional efforts. Industry leaders and local colleges and universities can work together to effect similar training programs in other locales. Such a cooperative effort can pay off for both the hospitality industry and the public relations profession.