

*Good Taste, Good Food, and the Gastronomer**Denise Gigante*

That which is not good, is not delicious
 To a well govern'd and wise appetite.

Milton, *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*¹

In the years around the turn of the nineteenth century in Paris, good food and good taste came together in the figure of the gastronomer. The term, etymologically derived from γαστερ (*gaster*: stomach) and νομος (*nomos*: mind), was devised at this time to indicate a sagacious eater. Prior to the advent of gastronomy, such a figure would have been a paradox. The Enlightenment discourse of aesthetic taste was, after all, predicated on the distancing of mental from bodily taste, privileging the former over the latter. Taste philosophers struggled with the metaphor (*goût*, *gusto*, taste) given by the modern languages to aesthetic experience. What could the intellectual activity of objective, disinterested judgment have to do with the salivary organs of the mouth – seat of instinctive, unthinking sensation? The purpose of aesthetic contemplation had always been to transcend bodily reality, and this gustatory metaphor of taste did not exist in classical aesthetics. Taste, symbolically connected as it was to the guts, ranked low on the philosophical hierarchy of the senses.² But in the age of gastronomy, when food was prepared and judged as an aesthetic object, the gastronomer emerged as a guide and a tastemaker, holding food to the same exacting standards of taste as the fine arts. The restaurant, by putting culinary artistry on display, demanded connoisseurship, encouraging consumers to develop critical sensibilities worthy of the chef, an artist of *nouvelle cuisine*.

¹ This and all subsequent quotations from Milton's poetry refer to the edition of his *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number, according to the following scheme: *M* for *A Masque*, *PL* for *Paradise Lost*, *PR* for *Paradise Regained*, and *S* for *Samson Agonistes*. Here, (*M* 704–5).

² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

The Parisian restaurants of post-revolutionary France, as venues of *discretionary* dining, differed from earlier eating establishments in catering to the cultivated tastes of consumers.³ They differed in this respect from the early French *tables d'hôte*, or the equivalent English ordinaries across the channel, which served a communal meal. There, consumers partook of the same fare, at the same table, at the same time, for the same price. There was little room for distinction among diners, and hence choice, that prerogative of the connoisseur, did not figure into the dining experience. By contrast, diners in the Parisian restaurants confronted a dizzying array of options. As dishes shrunk into à la carte portions, the fixed bill of fare expanded into an extravagant, folio-sized menu. The restaurants also privatized the public dining experience, isolating diners at separate tables where, cordoned off from the crowd, one could be as discriminating as one chose. But with this newfound freedom of choice came the responsibility to live up to the gastronomical standards of the connoisseur and eat sagaciously, rather than gluttonously. Appetite needed to be controlled, not because eating is bad or morally opposed to virtuous spirituality, but because intemperance leads to surfeit, the *loss* of appetite. The goal of the gastronome was to keep on eating, to prolong the taste experience.

The pages that follow take a cue from an early nineteenth-century gastronome and cook, the aptly named William Kitchiner. In his best-selling gastronomical cookbook of 1817, *The Cook's Oracle*, Kitchiner adopts the poet John Milton's view of the "good" life as "a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets, / Where no crude surfeit reigns."⁴ Miltonic taste represents a divinely sanctioned, full-bodied form of pleasure that even angels, those spiritually transcendent beings, experience. I have elsewhere argued that Milton's epic exploration of the metaphor of taste in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* was foundational for British empirical aesthetic taste theory.⁵ Here I want to argue that Milton was also a gastronome *avant la lettre* who demonstrated the bon vivant's attitude toward good living in the more comprehensive, philosophical sense of goodness, which does not divide aesthetics from ethics.

By pushing back the Miltonic frame of reference to the beginning of the poet's career, specifically to the masque known as *Comus* presented at Ludlow Castle in 1634, we find, in the title character, Milton's portrayal of

³ Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁴ Quoted from Milton's *Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* in William Kitchiner, *The Cook's Oracle* (London: Whittaker, Treacher, and Co., 1831), 5.

⁵ Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

the Ancient Greek god of cookery (κωμος; Komos). The masque is a celebration of temperance, but from a gastronomical perspective the epigraph to this chapter can be turned around. For if it is true that what is not good, is not delicious, as Comus' dinner guest claims, it is equally true that what is not delicious, is not good. Deliciousness here is a form of beauty, and Milton, a pivot between ancient and modern aesthetics, had not let go of the ancient trinity of the true, the beautiful, and the good. More than a good liver or bon vivant, Milton's Comus, the brainchild of a gastronome and a sadly misunderstood figure, is in point of fact the world's first restaurateur. We might call him the "foodie" precursor of Milton's Satan (who coming before human culture knew little about cooking), for he is master of that cookery-chicanery now known as culinary artistry.

Culinary Ancestry

When we first encounter Comus in Milton's *Masque*, he is involved in apparently bacchanalian festivities with a group of animal-headed, yet otherwise human, companions. A young Lady, lost in the woods nearby, attracts Comus' attention when she cries out for her two brothers, who have gone in quest of food and left her alone. Comus approaches her in the guise of a shepherd and claims to have seen her brothers gathering fruit, but at some distance. He invites her to his cottage for some refreshment. When she arrives, however, rather than the humble rustic abode she had been led to expect, she finds "a stately Palace, set out with all manners of deliciousness" and "tables spread with all dainties."⁶ Mistrusting such culinary lavishness, she refuses everything Comus offers her, including what appears to be his signature concoction, an "orient liquor in a crystal glass" (*M* 65). The Lady threatens to leave the table, but Comus charms her so that she cannot move. Her brothers suddenly arrive on the scene, grab Comus' glass, and smash it to the ground. He departs and Sabrina, a naiad, arrives to release the Lady from her spell. The *Masque* ends with a dance performed by the children as a triumph over "sensual Folly, and Intemperance" (*M* 974). The Spirit of the masque, in epilogue, exults in his liberation from watching over the children in much the same manner (and in the exact same meter) as Shakespeare's spirit Ariel at the end of *The Tempest*.

There is, in fact, much in Milton's debut drama that echoes Shakespeare's farewell to the stage – as if Milton were picking up where Shakespeare

⁶ The stage direction follows line 657 in Milton's *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*.

left off, as a dramatist self-conscious of his own artistry. The feast that Prospero conjures for the shipwrecked mariners on his island resonates in the one that Comus causes to appear before the young Lady as a spectacle that appeals to all the senses. Both are Magian-artists, stand-ins for the playwrights, both of whom are concerned with the ethical and aesthetic implications of conjuring airy nothings for the delectation of an audience. Prospero compares his theatrical illusions to “subtleties,” referring to those spectacular sugary sculptures that adorned the Renaissance banquet table and that dissolved or melted in the mouth when touched or tasted.⁷ He calls Ariel “my dainty,” and he is addressed in turn as “an enchanted trifle,” another light and airy dessert.⁸ His island is full of “sweet airs that give delight and hurt not,” and the sweetness here as elsewhere is synesthetic, musical as well as tasty.⁹ Ariel claims to “drink the air,”¹⁰ and the Spirit of Milton’s *Masque* echoes him: “I suck the liquid air” (*M* 980). Here Milton also echoes Ariel’s song in praise of honeyed, aesthetic delight: “Where the bee sucks, there suck I.”¹¹ The insubstantial delicacies sprinkled throughout Shakespeare’s play are a fit model for Comus’ since such foodstuffs have everything to do with the taste, and little to do with appetite.

If Milton’s *Masque* constitutes a polemic in favor of temperance, it would be a mistake to characterize that temperance as monkish austerity, a bitter and “crabbed” asceticism, or even abstinence (*M* 477). Milton was temperate in his habits, but he was by no means opposed to pleasure. His biographers note his exacting standards of taste at table, and the fact that what he ate had to be “of the best” with ingredients “most in season.”¹² Comus, although typically seen as a personification of intemperance, shows no evidence of this himself. It is true that he is descended from an intemperate father, Bacchus (βᾶκχος), otherwise known as Dionysus (Διόνυσος), who presides over grape harvests, wine pressing, merrymaking, and naturally, theater. But Milton has Comus run away from home. He renounces his Dionysian paternity by wandering out of Arcadia, and northwest across continental Europe. The Celtic and Iberian fields do not suit him, so he crosses the English Channel and settles in the woods surrounding Ludlow Castle. The Lady imagines that she has seen him reveling with hinds and

⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, edited by Robert Langbaum, revised ed. (New York: Signet, 1998), 5.1.124.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.1.95, 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.2.141.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.1.101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.1.88.

¹² Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 12.

shepherds to thank “the bounteous Pan” for “their teeming Flocks and grange full” (*M* 175–76). But such a pastoral idyll seems incompatible with the “ominous Wood” that the Spirit describes as being “in the thick shelter of black shades imbow’rd” (*M* 61–62). The Lady herself complains of “the blind mazes of this tangl’d Wood” (*M* 180).

The reason the Lady is alone in the dark labyrinth of the wood in the first place is that the path she has traveled with her brothers has been anything but “bounteous.” It is barren of food, and the Lady explains to Comus that her brothers have gone to look for “Berries, or such cooling fruit / As the kind hospitable Woods provide” (*M* 185–86). She seems mentally trapped in a Golden Age of innocence, for the woods are about as hospitable as a “Thicket” can be (*M* 192). Her brothers have had to wander out of eyesight and out of earshot in their possibly fruitless quest. “I saw them under a green mantling vine / That crawls along the side of yon small hill,” Comus says, but he is too artful to be trusted when he adds what they were doing: “Plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots” (*M* 294–96). The woods are dark, not only because it is evening, and it does not take a vintner to know that grapes and berries in order to ripen need sun. The spot where the Lady encounters Comus is shadowed by a canopy of pines, an arboreal genre one does not associate with Bacchus. Milton’s Comus, albeit the son of Bacchus, has left his ancestral fields, ripe with abundantly clustering grapes, far behind.

Milton describes Bacchus as he who “first from out the purple Grape, / Crusht the sweet poison of misused Wine” (*M* 46–47). Wine becomes “poison” when it is “misused.” Bacchus presses the grapes, but the responsibility for their goodness lies less with the provider than the consumer: it has deleterious effects when imbibed intemperately. The Spirit of the masque confirms that “most do taste” Comus’ liquor “through fond intemperate thirst” (*M* 67). As a result, their animality becomes apparent, as they transform into so many human monsters. Their countenances assume “some brutish form of Woolf, or Bear, / Or Ounce, or Tiger, Hog, or bearded Goat,” and their higher faculties of intellection, sensibility, and judgment become obscured (*M* 70–71). We might, with the young Lady, blame their fates on Comus, assuming that “none / but such as a good man can give good things” (*M* 702–3). But the brute features seem merely to reflect the brute natures of those who greedily quaff Comus’ liquor. Besides, we must ask, when did such pat morality as this ever apply to artists, or artistry? Shakespeare knew better in his dark portrait of Prospero, and Milton’s Satan, the most artful character of *Paradise Lost*, steals that show, leading many to believe that Milton was of the devil’s party.

Comus is, in any event, less his father's child than his mother's. "Much like his Father," the Spirit describes him, "but his Mother more" (*M* 57). This is striking because, for one thing, the Comus of classical mythology did not have a mother. Milton makes Circe, a hostess with a bad reputation if ever there was one, his parent. We associate her with the "charmed Cup" that turns Odysseus' men into pigs in Homer's *Odyssey* (*M* 50). "Whoever tasted" from the cup, the Miltonic Spirit relates, "lost his upright shape, / And downward fell into groveling Swine" (*M* 51–52). But like the thirsty travelers in Comus' wood, Odysseus' men are famished and give into their cravings without restraint. They gobble up the oxen of the sun god Helios when they know they shouldn't, and they become gluttons at Circe's board. They, like Comus' guests, forget their higher human natures and "roll with pleasure in a sensual sty" (*M* 76). Comus recalls his mother "Amidst the flowry-kirtl'd *Naiades* / Culling their Potent herbs, and baleful drugs," but we do not know whether Circe's herbs – like Bacchus' wine – are baleful because they are misused (*M* 252–53). Comus' concoction represents an advance in culinary chemistry, for we are told that he "Excels his Mother at her mighty Art" (*M* 63).

Manipulating "nature" in any way through culinary chemistry, whether it be boiling vegetables, roasting flesh, distilling fruit, grain, tea leaves, coffee beans, herbs, or what have you, involves the contamination we call culture. This artful transfiguration of products of nature is also the condition of possibility for nouvelle cuisine, which turns food into a fine art (*haute cuisine*). Before the revolution in cookery that resulted in French nouvelle cuisine, the epitome of culture was a courtly table heaped high with the results of the hunt. Abundant, communal dishes were spread across the table *à la française* in several removes, and meat was ostentatious in its animality. Game, livestock, and fish were, to the degree possible, dressed and served up whole. The aristocratic art of carving figured into the dining experience, as guests performed the honors at table. Norbert Elias and Stephen Mennell have narrated the story of how the "civilizing process" intended to produce tasteful subjects gradually made animals disappear from the table.¹³ Roasts were relegated to a side table for carving, and ultimately disappeared behind the closed doors of the kitchen, to lose the shape of the animals they once were before ever appearing at the table. As Rebecca Spang explains, "nature needed to be

¹³ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978); Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

cleansed in order to be fit for human consumption; cookery, by civilizing the raw materials of human diet, could propel humanity from its brutish origin.”¹⁴ A correspondent change in service patterns, whereby single portions prearranged on a plate followed each other sequentially (*à la russe*) to the table for individual delectation and judgment, carries over into restaurant practice today.

A diet weighed down by large cuts of meat had bred a host of distempers, from indigestion to gout (a bad form of *goût*), and the central tenet of the nouvelle cuisine that emerged in early eighteenth-century France held that good food ought to be good *for* you. The nouvelle cuisine was lighter, like the preparations of Milton’s Comus and his mother Circe, consisting only of the chemically distilled essences of food. Delicacy, the metric of the connoisseur, became the standard by which such refined food would be judged. The bible of French nouvelle cuisine, titled *Gifts of Comus* (*Les dons de Comus*) and prepared by the Parisian chef François Marin, remarks: “Cookery, like all the other arts invented for need or pleasure, is perfected with the genius of a people, and becomes more delicate to the same degree that they become more polished.”¹⁵ Delicacy was the chief gift of the modern Comus to a culture of taste. In this respect, Milton’s Comus is more in step with the culinary chemistry that made possible nouvelle cuisine, and in turn the modern institution of the restaurant, than the early-modern version of the feast.

The Gifts of Comus

In cataloguing the various soups, consommés, ragoûts, fricassees, and other fluid mixtures of the nouvelle cuisine in *The Gifts of Comus*, Marin puts the emphasis on the most delicate, the bouillon, which he calls *l’âme de la cuisine*, the soul, spirit, or vital principle of cookery.¹⁶ “The science of cooking consists today in composing, in making digestible and quintessencing food [*quintessencier des viands*],” he instructs, “of extracting their nourishing and light juices, in mixing and confounding them together, in such a way that none dominate and that all are able to be perceived.”¹⁷ Just as a man of fine taste in writing can pick out literary beauties from a work, only a man with a refined palate can discern nicely between the finely blended flavors of

¹⁴ Spang, *Invention of the Restaurant*, 41.

¹⁵ [François Marin,] *Les Dons de Comus, ou l’Art de la Cuisine, Réduit en pratique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Pissot, 1758), xxviii; my translations.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

nouvelle cuisine. In a famous *Spectator* paper from 1712 (no. 409) on taste, Joseph Addison used this same analogy to compare the literary critic to a tea connoisseur:

after having tasted ten different kinds of tea ... [the connoisseur] would distinguish, without seeing the colour of it, the particular sort which was offered him; and not only so, but any two sorts of them that were mixt together in an equal proportion; nay, he has carried the experiment so far, as upon tasting the composition of three different sorts, to name the parcels from whence the three several ingredients were taken.¹⁸

The food of nouvelle cuisine was spiritualized, and delicacy guided the art of judgment in corporeal as in mental, or aesthetic, taste.

The quintessence dubbed the “soul of cuisine” in *The Gifts of Comus* would come to be known – for its goodness – as a *restaurant* (restorative). Milton’s Comus offers his distillation to the Lady in Milton’s masque as just such a restorative, suggesting that she is laboring under a digestive distemper. Her frowns are symptoms of poorly concocted food. Bad digestion has caused an imbalance in her bodily fluids (humors), and her blood is clotted down with black bile, her spleen swollen with that same brownish sediment: “the lees / And settlings of a melancholy blood” (*M* 809–10). What she needs is something light and medicinal. Comus offers his glass, promising that its contents “will cure all straight, one sip of this / Will bathe the drooping spirits” (*M* 811–12). But he makes the mistake of slipping from the rhetoric of dietary health into the more alarming arena of gastronomical pleasure when he adds, in the line immediately following, “in delight / Beyond the bliss of dreams” (*M* 813). The Lady, who associates pleasure with sin, rejects his brew, convinced as she is that since Comus is not “good,” he cannot produce good food, despite whether it tastes good or is good for her.

The dialectic between Comus and the Lady leading up to this point constitutes a debate over the ontology of food – its ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic dimensions – in which Miltonic ideas are bandied about and something like a Miltonic perspective can only be distilled by the reader. Kitchiner quotes the Lady’s own words (“That which is not good, is not delicious / To a well-govern’d and wise appetite”) against her, so to speak, as evidence that Milton did not make one of those “gloomy philosophers (uninitiated in Culinary Science),” who “have tried to make the world believe – who seem to have delighted

¹⁸ Joseph Addison, Richard Steele et al. *The Spectator*, 8 vols. (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1749), vol. 6, 53.

in persuading you, that every thing that is Nice must be noxious; – and that everything that is Nasty is wholesome.”¹⁹ How appetite is to be governed, and to what end, is the central question of *Comus*. Seen from a gastronomical perspective, the question turns out to be more interesting than an allegorical interpretation of good and evil might have it. Kitchiner claims to have based the recipes in *The Cook’s Oracle* on the principles of nouvelle cuisine, or “the purest Epicurean principles of indulging the Palate as far as it can be done without injury or offense to the Stomach, and forbidding nothing but what is absolutely unfriendly to Health.”²⁰ Milton’s own epicurean philosophy – sweetened, as in Epicurus, by being rendered in verse – is then invoked as an authority by Kitchiner: a “perpetual feast of nectar’d sweets, / Where no crude surfeit reigns” (*M* 479–80).

This appeal to dietary health by the artists of nouvelle cuisine was used to advertise the first restaurants in Paris in the 1760s. Jean François Vacossin opened a restaurant on the rue-de-Grenelle shortly after Mathurin Roze de Chantoiseau led the way with the first restaurant of record. Vacossin offered *restaurants* to the public under a sign in Latin saying, “Run to me all you whose stomachs labor and I will restore you” (*Accurite ad me omnes qui stomach laboratis et ego vos restaurabo*).²¹ While taste could be cultivated, without a healthy appetite no progress could be made. The quintessence known as the *restaurant* was the first step in a culinary advance that would come to fruition in the nouvelle cuisine of the grand Parisian restaurants of the Napoleonic era. The slogan was a cheeky adaptation of Christ’s words as recorded by Matthew: “Come to me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I shall give you rest.”²² In Vacossin’s version, the restaurateur appears as a savior of appetite. He relieves the sins of intemperate eating and counters the heavy, indelicate fare of contemporary bon vivants with delicate preparations that did not require the same kind of digestive labor. Proponents of the nouvelle cuisine, to quote Spang, “contrasted the old-fashioned eater, weighed down with extraneous and heavy, earthy foods, with a modern eater, released from corporeality by his subsistence on ‘essences.’”²³ The new cookery, in accord with the new science, intended to lead culture back through empirical experience to Paradise, with the abundant recompense of good taste.

¹⁹ Kitchiner, *Cook’s Oracle*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

²¹ Spang, *Invention of the Restaurant*, 28

²² Matthew, 11:29. Holy Bible, King James Version.

²³ Spang, *Invention of the Restaurant*, 48.

Comus' Restaurant

Comus emphasizes the “dainty limbs” and “soft delicacy” of his guest in Milton’s *Masque*, and in offering her the contents of his glass, assures her that it “will restore all soon” (*M* 687–90). He points out that she has “been tir’d all day without repast” (*M* 688). He has in fact offered his *restaurant* “to every weary Traveller,” with the promise that it will provide “Refreshment after toil” and “ease after pain” (*M* 64–65). *Accurite ad me*, he might have said, *et ego vos restaurabo*. What he does say, in his last words of the play, is: “Be wise, and taste. —” (*M* 813). It is important to note that he does *not* say, like Satan more than once in *Paradise Regained*, “sit and eat” (*PR* 2.336, 368, my emphasis). He rather uses the same language as Adam, who invites his angelic guest to “sit and taste” the good things prepared by Eve from the garden of Eden (*PL* 5.368–69). A good chef requires a good critic. “The most skillful of cooks will soon lapse into mediocrity, if in the service of a careless master, who has neither the feeling, nor the taste, nor the judgment, nor the experience that true *gourmandise* requires,” insists the father of French gastronomy, Alexandre Balthasar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière.²⁴ Milton’s Comus has yet to find such an appropriate patron with experience, sensibility, and judgment. It is a theme in Milton that to taste intemperately is not to taste, but to gluttonously devour, as Eve does for example when she eats the forbidden fruit: “Greedily she ingorg’d without restraint” (*PL* 9.791). Those who have partaken of Comus’ concoction have done so greedily and *unwisely*, as we have seen, through “fond intemperate thirst.” An epicure in a puritanical land, Comus is a chef in search of a connoisseur.

We cannot venture to say whether Milton would have gone so far as to espouse the gastronomical maxim that one may live to eat, rather than merely eating to live, but it is hard to believe that for an aesthete like Milton the latter would qualify as good living. The poet’s happiest marriage seems to have been bound by a culinary contract. “God have mercy, Betty,” he exclaimed once to his third wife, “I see thou wilt perform according to thy promise in providing me such dishes as I think fit whilst I live; and, when I die, thou knowest that I have left thee all.”²⁵ Like Milton’s wife Elizabeth,

²⁴ Alexandre Balthasar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière, *Manuel des Amphitryons, Contenant un traité de la dissection des viandes à table, la nomenclature des menus les plus nouveaux pour chaque saison, et les élémens de politesse gourmande* (Paris: Capelle et Renand, 1808), as translated by Michael Garval and excerpted in Denise Gigante, ed., *Gusto: Essential Writings in Nineteenth-Century Gastronomy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 51.

²⁵ Quoted in David Masson, *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time*, 7 vols. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), vol. 6, 728.

Eve worries about preparing food to her husband's satisfaction in *Paradise Lost*. We see her in a veritable agony of decision as she inspects the fruits and vegetables of the garden:

on hospitable thoughts intent
 What choice to choose for delicacy best,
 What order, so contriv'd as not to mix
 Tastes, not well joyn'd, inelegant, but bring
 Taste after taste upheld with kindest change;
 (PL 5.332–36)

In planning her menu, Eve is concerned not only with the quality of ingredients, but with the way the different dishes will harmonize sequentially in the meal to best effect. Invoking Comus as an authority, Grimod de la Reynière states that, “pretty much the same is true of a Menu as of a sonnet. Comus ‘Forbade a weak *dish* ever to appear, / Nor a *delicacy*, once served, to reappear.’”²⁶ Grimod adapts these lines from Nicolas Boileau’s *The Art of Poetry* (*L’art poétique*). This was a neoclassical version of the Horatian *Art of Poetry* (*Ars poetica*), which points out which defects a poet ought to avoid. The central Horatian faux pas, however, was not a weak phrase or the repetition of a fine one, but that monstrosity, the mixed metaphor. In culinary terms, this becomes the tasteless mixture of flavors that Eve, in composing her meal, strives to avoid: “Tastes, not well joyn’d, inelegant.”

The Miltonic pleasures of the table, even in prelapsarian Paradise, are hardly puritanical. Adam and Eve’s lunch guest, the archangel Raphael, declares that God has caused the earth to be fruitful and multiply, “for food and for delight” (PL 5.400). This is another culinary adaptation of the Horatian *Ars poetica*, which famously defines the purpose of art as *dulce et utile*, pleasing and useful, or in culinary terms, tasty (sweet) and nutritive.²⁷ Eve seems to know what the young Lady of Milton’s *Masque* does not, namely that Milton’s “holy dictate of spare Temperance” does not mean self-denial (M 765). It is instead the well-govern’d appetite that will allow one to taste, and to taste again to the power of infinitude the gustatory delights provided by one’s maker. Miltonic philosophy expresses the *bon vivant*’s version of the good life as a neverending feast of nectared sweets, and, had Milton stepped into his own *Masque*, he might have shown

²⁶ Grimod de la Reynière, *Manuel des Amphitryons*, as translated by Michael Garval and excerpted in Gigante, *Gusto*, 51.

²⁷ Horace, *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 443.

the experience, perhaps also the sensibility and judgment, that the Lady lacks – and that Comus needs in the form of a food critic. He might have shown that one can taste with “Sapience,” to use his own double entendre from *Paradise Lost*, from the Latin *sapere* which combines both flavor and wisdom, the taste of the palate and the mental taste called judgment (*PL* 9.1018). The goal of every gastronomer was to become, as Adam puts it, “exact of taste” (*PL* 9.1017).

God the “Nourisher” in *Paradise Lost* provides more food than necessary for bodily sustenance. He pours his “bounties . . . unmeasur’d out” for Eve to gather, which she does and then “on the board / Heaps with unsparing hand” (*PL* 5.398–99, 343–44). As the cornucopia spills over, Eve spreads her table with the best of what India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean have to offer (*PL* 5.338–41). She does not serve her produce in crude form, but crushes, presses, and tempers it into liquids, “dulcet creams,” which she pours into vessels carved from gourds (*PL* 5.345–48). Her tempering is a kind of tampering that softens and harmonizes flavors tastefully like the artistry of nouvelle cuisine. Given the quantity of imported luxury goods, her meal is not only cultured, but Orientalized. “Luxury and delicateness at the table, had their birth in Asia, with the Assyriens and the Persians,” we learn in *The Gifts of Comus*, “and the quality of the climate did not contribute little, without doubt, to render those people so voluptuous.”²⁸ Voluptuousness is a feature of Orientalism, as Edward Said has shown, a celebration of sensual pleasure associated with the moral corruption of an indolent East.²⁹ But in *The Gifts of Comus*, luxury was born as the twin of delicacy at the Oriental tables of the East.

The coffeehouses of the Enlightenment culture of taste originated in the East, and a form of Orientalized exoticism characterized the culture of gastronomy as an extension of that culture. According to Grimod de la Reynière, one can be a refined gourmand or, to put it the other way around, a sensual man of taste, for, “one may eat much, and for a long time, without becoming indisposed; this is what a Gourmand desires above all.”³⁰ Immediately following this gastronomical vision of the good life, he adds: “what an existence is that of a true Gourmand! – the very image of Mohammed’s paradise!”³¹ If culinary delicacy originates in the Orient, it would make sense that the gastronomical version of Paradise is Oriental.

²⁸ Marin, *Les Dons de Comus*, xxviii–xix.

²⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Pantheon, 1978).

³⁰ Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière, *Almanach des Gourmands, servant de guide dans les moyens de faire excellente chère* (Paris: Périgord, Maradon, 1803–12), 12, my translation.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Luxuriousness is a form of goodness for the gastronome, whose philosophy insists that one can indulge epicurean principles of pleasure tastefully.

Although we do not know what exactly is in Comus' glass, the Spirit labels it an "orient liquor." If the Orient is associated with an anti-puritanical luxuriousness that even the Lady of Milton's *Masque* admits has the power to "charm" her eyes, it would make sense that Said should choose the illustration of a snake charmer for the cover of *Orientalism* (M 758). Artifice can be interpreted with the Lady as a morally suspect corruption of natural innocence. Metaphorical language is a form of fabrication, which is a form of lying, or as Kant puts it, "consciously representing the false as true."³² Milton's subtle serpent is dangerous because of his forked double-speech. Yet, Satan's artistry, which makes him charming to Eve, turns out to be no less suspect than the culinary subtleties of nouvelle cuisine. "Rejecting any possibility of artistic genius in the kitchen," Spang explains, its early critics "presented cooks as masters of deception."³³ Cookery, to the Lady in *Comus*, means only falsification (as in "cooking" the evidence). But fiction-alizing is the poet's job, as much as the chef's. If Shakespeare is Prospero, as the epilogue to *The Tempest* suggests, Milton is Comus.

Another Amphitryon

Once food has been transformed from its natural state through *L'Art de la Cuisine*, as the art of cookery is called in the title of the second edition of *The Gifts of Comus*, it takes not only a refined but a curious consumer to discern what went into the composition. The first edition of 1739 addressed itself to those curious (*curieuses*) consumers "who are desirous of knowing what they are given to eat (*donner à manger*)."³⁴ Comus' gifts, his *dons* (a noun derived from the French verb for hospitality), are intended for the curious. Eve's curiosity is what made her take the plunge into culture that the Lady in *Comus* resists, for the latter is not in the least curious to try what is in Comus' glass, or prove her "judicious" palate (*PL* 9.1017). As Eve knew, one must taste, or test, the thing oneself in order to judge. Milton leans upon this contemporary meaning of taste in *Samson Agonistes* when

³² Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, translated by Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 150.

³³ Spang, *Invention of the Restaurant*, 49.

³⁴ The full title published in Paris by Prault & Sons in 1739 reads: *Les dons de Comus, ou Les delices de la table. Ouvrage non-seulement utile aux officiers de bouche pour ce qui concerne leur art, mais principalement à l'usage des personnes que sont curieuses de sçavoir donner à manger, & d'être servies délicatement, tan en gras qu'en maigre, suivant les saisons, & dans le goût le plus nouveau.*

the protagonist challenges his opponent to test his strength: "The way to know were not to see but taste" (S 1091). In refusing to taste, the Lady in *Comus* refuses to leave innocence, for knowledge (*connaissance*), if it come at all, must come through empirical probation. "Prove all things," Milton would argue in the first edition of *Areopagitica* ten years after *Comus*, but "hold fast that which is good."³⁵

The Lady will only allow one meaning of good when she calls nature a "good cateress," who "Means her provision only to the good / That live according to her sober laws" (M 764–65). But in her abstinence, she takes the "holy dictate of spare Temperance" to an un-Miltonic extreme. "Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth," *Comus* asks the Lady, only to follow his question up with an answer that goes some way to explain the problem he is having: "But all to please and sate the curious taste" (M 710–14). A culinary art that alters food through artifice into objects of cultural consumption necessarily involves some moral ambivalence. To this degree, the Lady is right. Taste is a mark of culture and intellectual distinction, which entails a sense of moral superiority, but it is also a sign of cultural sophistication at odds with innocence, nature, and hence, moral purity. But with her straitened notion of goodness, we must wonder whether she is philosophically equipped to judge or appreciate any of *Comus*' gifts.

The gift he seems the most proud of – dramatic as any flambé made to dazzle diners in the best restaurants – "flames and dances in his crystal bounds / With spirits of balm and fragrant Syrups mixt" (M 673–74). Syrups that are fragrant are by definition flavorful, and these "spirits of balm," to the degree that they are balmy, are also Oriental. But the Lady announces that she will not let *Comus* "charm" her judgment with his "orient liquor" (M 758, 65). She seems to see herself only as a character in a morality play, a personification of Virtue struggling against the Vice cast as *Comus*. She rejects his glass "and goes about to rise."³⁶ Perhaps forgetting that taste cannot be compelled, *Comus* demands that she remain seated, threatening to chain up her nerves and deaden her sensibility by freezing her into alabaster (M 658–60). But to numb her is to give up on her as someone who can taste his "cordial Julep" correctly (M 672). "Corporeal taste and spiritual taste depend equally on the conformation of the nerves," *The Gifts of Comus* instructs, "with the organs of sensation."³⁷ Without

³⁵ John Milton, *Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England* (London, 1644), 11.

³⁶ From the stage direction immediately above M 658.

³⁷ Marin, *Les dons de Comus*, xxvii.

the nervous tentacles of perception, she can taste neither physically nor mentally. Yet, if the punishment fits the crime, such that the intemperate consumers of *Comus* are reduced to their own base animality, the Lady's insentient condition would seem a more appropriate result of not tasting – not testing, not being curious to know, good food or bad, or just *what* is in Comus' cup.

The last words we hear Comus say are these: “Be wise, and taste. –” The stage direction immediately following informs us that the Lady's brothers make this impossible by rushing in and destroying his elegant glass. Sabrina then arrives from the court of the sea goddess Amphitrite and uses her own knowledge of culinary chemistry to reduce the tackiness of the gums that Comus has heated to affix the Lady to her seat, thus freeing her from his “clasping charm” and “numbing spell” (*M* 853). This watery spirit of Amphitrite is a spirit of hospitality, insofar as the name *Amphitrite* phonetically echoes *Amphitryon*, associated with an ancient myth of hospitality that reverberates in the literature of gastronomy. Jupiter assumes the shape of the Theban General Amphitryon in that myth and hosts a lavish banquet at the latter's villa. When Amphitryon returns home, the guests do not acknowledge him, caring only for the “Amphitryon” who has wine and dined them. Molière's comedy *Amphitryon* culminates in the line: “The true Amphitryon is the Amphitryon who entertains.”³⁸ In the age of gastronomy Amphitryon would become synonymous with host. Grimod de la Reynière calls his 1805 etiquette book, *Manuel des Amphitryons*. Milton would not have known Molière's comedy, for it was first performed in the court of Louis XIV in 1668, but the Roman comedian Plautus had staged it as a burlesque.

Milton points out in his masque that naiads waited on Circe when she prepared for her feast, and Sabrina informs the Lady that she must return “To wait in *Amphitrite's* bow'r” (*M* 921). When imagining “the sort of banquet which might have served for the marriage feast of Neptune and Amphitrite,” Benjamin Disraeli writes that it “ought to have been administered by the Neireids and the Naiads; terrines of turtle, pools of water souchee, flounders of every hue, and eels in every shape, cutlets of salmon, salmis of carp, ortolans represented by whitebait, and huge roasts carved out of the sturgeon.”³⁹ Perhaps, in the end, the gastromedicinal

³⁸ Molière [Jean-Baptiste Poquelin], *Amphitryon*, edited by Pierre Mélése (Lille: Librairie Giard, 1950), 98; my translation.

³⁹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Wit and Wisdom of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, Collected from His Writings and Speeches* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881), 103.

restaurant Comus peddles in the wilds of Britain is eclipsed by the more Mediterranean “restaurant” of Amphitrite, a female Amphitryon who sends her waitress Sabrina with a vial of healing “liquors” to the Lady seated at Comus’ table, on a mission to restore her (*M* 847). While there is plenty of moralizing at the end of the masque on the part of the children and their attendant Spirit about virtue and chastity, Milton believed as little in the latter as a “cloistered virtue” as he did in a beadle’s sense of the good.⁴⁰ In the end, Comus’ meal may have been fit only for a connoisseur like Milton – tried through experience, perfected through practice, prophetic of finer things to come in the form of that grand gastronomical theater, the gourmet restaurant.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Addison, Joseph, Richard Steele, et al. *The Spectator*. 8 vols. London: J. and R. Tonson, 1749.
- Disraeli, Benjamin. *Wit and Wisdom of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, Collected from His Writings and Speeches*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881.
- Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Urizen Books, 1978.
- Gigante, Denise, ed. *Gusto: Essential Writings in Nineteenth-Century Gastronomy*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Taste: A Literary History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Grimod de la Reynière, Alexandre Balthasar Laurent. *Manuel des Amphitryons, Contenant un traité de la dissection des viandes à table, la nomenclature des menus les plus nouveaux pour chaque saison, et les elemens de politesse gourmande*. Paris: Capelle et Renand, 1808.
- Almanach des Gourmands, servant de guide dans les moyens de faire excellente chère*. Paris: Périgord, Maradon, 1803–12.
- Horace, *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Victor Lyle Dowdell. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.
- Kitchiner, William. *The Cook’s Oracle*. London: Whittaker, Treacher, and Co., 1831.
- Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Lewalski, Barbara. *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.
- [Marin, François]. *Les Dons de Comus, ou l’Art de la Cuisine, Réduit en pratique*. 2nd ed. Paris: Pissot, 1758.

⁴⁰ This phrase was added after the first edition of *Areopagitica*; see Milton, *Complete Poems*, 728.

- Masson, David. *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time*. 7 vols. 1877–96. Reprint, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965.
- Mennell, Stephen. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Edited by Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey, 1957.
- Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England*. London, 1644.
- Molière [Jean-Baptiste Poquelin]. *Amphitryon*. Edited by Pierre Mélése. Lille: Librairie Giard, 1950.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Pantheon, 1978.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Robert Langbaum. Revised ed. New York: Signet, 1998.
- Spang, Rebecca L. *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.