



"The joys of the table belong equally to all ages, conditions, countries and times."

BRILLAT-SAVARIN

GRAND GOURMET

■ The patron saint of gastronomes is Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, whose delectable masterpiece, *Physiologie du Goût* (*Physiology of Taste*) raised eating to the level of an art and is still the bible of gourmets the world over.

He was born on April 1, 1755 at Belley in the mountainous Ain region of eastern France. His father, Marc-Anthelme Brillat was a distinguished lawyer and *procureur du roi* who added the name of Savarin to please a rich aunt. His mother was noted beauty Claudine Aurore Récamier, in whose honor he named one of the great creations of French *haute cuisine*: *L'Oreiller de la Belle Aurore* (Beautiful Aurora's Pillow), an elaborate pâté made of saddle of hare, chicken, duck, red partridges, tenderloin of veal, sweetbreads, fillet of pork, and a score of other ingredients.

One of six children (three girls and three boys), Brillat-Savarin grew up in his parents' comfortable home and became a prosperous lawyer in the family tradition. His other activities included studying medicine, chemistry, music, hunting, enjoying the company of pretty women; and, particularly, dining

in the best private homes and inns.

He was elected to the National Assembly in 1789, supported most of the planned reforms except trial by jury and the abolition of the death penalty. He became chief justice of the Court of Appeal in his home district, but during the Reign of Terror (1793) he was forced to flee to Switzerland to escape imminent arrest.* In the following year he sailed to America.

His first success was in Boston where he taught Monsieur Julien, proprietor of a fashionable restaurant and former chef to the archbishop of Bordeaux, how to make a fondue.† This new dish caused such a sensation among the natives that the restaurateur rewarded his gastronomic colleague with a freshly killed roebuck.

In New York Brillat-Savarin gave French lessons, supplemented his income by playing first violin in New York's only theatre orchestra.** He once shot a wild turkey in Connecticut, spent days preparing it for his American guests in a manner

*Someone denounced him as a royalist sympathizer.

†Melted cheese mixed with white wine and, usually, *kirsch*.

**The John Street Theatre.

"charming to the eye, flattering to the sense of smell and delicious as to taste."

He returned to France in 1796 (during the Directory), became Secretary to the Staff of the Armies of the Rhine, resigned and resumed his post as judge in the Court of Appeal. There he serenely spent the last 25 years of his life, through the Consulate, the Empire, the Hundred Days and the restored monarchy. During this period he wrote five works: on economics, the theory of law, dueling, archeology,* and his masterpiece, *Physiologie du Goût* (1825).

Brillat-Savarin had forfeited his father's estate during the Revolution but was indemnified and bought a charming house in Vieu (Ain), which still stands. A bachelor, he spent ten months of the year in Paris, but every September returned to his country home run by his maiden sisters, Maria and Gasparde.†

During his country sojourn Brillat-

*A pioneer in archeology and regional development, Brillat-Savarin was one of the first members of the French Antiquarian Society.

†They stayed in bed ten months of the year, got up only two days before their brother's arrival.

Savarin plied his friends with regional specialties such as fillet of beef stuffed with black truffles, white pistachio nuts, mushrooms, unsalted olives, small cubes of bacon, marinated for 48 hours in white wine and herbs, grilled on the spit, covered with fresh butter, and served in its own gravy. In Paris he was a familiar figure in the leading salons of his day, particularly in that of his cousin, the famous beauty Jeanne-Françoise Récamier.*

The Book. The best of Brillat-Savarin's wit, elegance, charm, humor and sophistication went into *Physiologie du Goût*, still the most beguiling book ever written about eating and its related pleasures. Only a small portion of the book deals with the physiology of taste; the rest is a wide-ranging foray from the gastronomic point of view into medicine and science, esthetics, sex, religion, travel, field sports, psychology.

Although the author was 70 when the book was published, its gaiety and verve mark it as the work of a much younger man. He brought it out anonymously ("par le professeur") at his own expense; to his surprise it became an immediate success. Honoré de Balzac called it "the most original production of French literature since Rabelais," wrote an enthusiastic appendix to the second edition in 1838.

The book consists of a collection of aphorisms, thirty "meditations" (chapters) on various aspects of life, and a racy miscellany of observations and anecdotes relating to food and its influence on people. Here are some of the aphorisms:

Dessert without cheese is like a pretty girl with only one eye.

Pastry is to cooking what rhetorical figures are to literary prose.

The discovery of a new dish is more beneficial to humanity than the discovery of a new star.

The meal may be held responsible for the birth of language.

The meditations began with a dissertation on the senses in general; man proceeds from sight to hearing, to touch, to smell, to taste, to physical love (called the sixth sense), which functions best after (but not immediately after) a good meal.

He considered gastronomy as the most important of the "sciences" because it sustained man from the cradle to the grave, enhanced the pleasures of love and the intimacy

of friendship, disarmed hatred, rendered business easier.

Medicine. Brillat-Savarin admired physicians above all professional men, dedicated his book to some of the famous physicians who came from his native region.

Boon companion was Dr. Anselme Balthasar Richerand, consulting surgeon to Louis XVIII, who received the members of the

cal advice, or what passed for medicine in those days. The author was particularly excited by the recent discovery of osmazome, the principle derived from muscular fiber that gives the peculiar odor to roast meats and gravies. He compared the discovery to alcohol, which intoxicated many generations before it was known that it could be extracted by distillation.



19th century drawings for *Physiologie du Goût* illustrating *Meditation XIV*, above, that discusses sensual accessories that add zest to eating, and *Meditation XIII* that describes a pheasant served in all its plumage.



French Academy at his villa in Ain and encouraged Brillat-Savarin to write *Physiologie du Goût*. Other warm friends included Dr. François Coste, chief physician of the French expedition to America during the Revolutionary War; Dr. Jean-Nicolas Corvisart, Napoleon's chief physician* and the gastronome's nephew, Dr. Claude Récamier.

The book is peppered with medi-

He noted that digestion was the function that most affected the moral state of an individual; the manner in which digestion was performed could render a person sad, gay, taciturn, talkative, morose, or melancholy. Humans could be divided into three main categories: the "regulars," the "confined" and the "loose," depending on their bowel habits.

He warned that the beginning of digestion was a dangerous time

*Fidèle amie of writer Chateaubriand.

*He popularized Auenbrugger's method of auscultation by percussion.

to indulge in mental efforts, more dangerous still to perform "genetic enjoyments." Wrote he: "Our graveyards are filled every year with hundreds of men who, after having dined, and often after having dined too well, neither closed their eyes nor stopped their ears."

On the nature of sleep, Brillat-Savarin echoed one of the weird ideas held at that period, that there existed some sort of fluid ("as subtle as powerful") that transmitted sensory impressions to the brain: sleep was caused by the loss or inertness of this fluid.

Brillat-Savarin was humorously prophetic when he wrote that if he had been a physician he would have specialized in the realm of corpulence or weight control. Noted he: "For to be exactly stout enough, neither too much nor too little, is for women the study of their life."

He acknowledged that through life he regarded his stomach as a formidable antagonist. Said he: "I vanquished it, and only made it look majestic; but to do so it was necessary to fight against it."

Brillat-Savarin's three rules for overcoming corpulence were discretion in eating, moderation in sleep, exercise on foot or on horseback. Added he wistfully: "Much resolution is needed to be able to leave the dinner table with an appetite, for as long as this craving is felt, one morsel calls forth another with an irresistible attraction, and as a general rule men eat as long as they feel hungry, in spite of doctors."

In his day there was a notion that acids (especially vinegar) prevented the accumulation of unwanted fat. He warned that although this might be true, the continual use of acids would destroy the freshness of youth, health and life, and he damned drinking lemonade. For slimming he recommended before breakfast a glass of dry white wine containing a teaspoonful of the best Peruvian bark (*chinchona*).

One subject on which the master refused to commit himself was the much vaunted claim that truffles were aphrodisiac. His cautious comment: "The truffle is not a positive aphrodisiac, but it may under certain circumstances render women more affectionate, and men more amiable."

Gourmandise. Disdaining the dictionary definitions of *gourmandise* as gluttony or voracity, Brillat-Savarin preferred to call it "an impassioned, rational and habitual

preference for all objects which flatter the sense of taste."

He noted with regret that not everyone could be a *gourmand*: some did not have proper taste buds in their tongues; others might be too nervous, talkative or preoccupied with business. But all things being equal, physicians (with literary men and wealthy people) usually became *gourmands* because

the table; the other conveys to her mouth little morsels elegantly carved, or the wing of a partridge for her teeth to sever; her eyes sparkle, her lips are glossy, her conversation is agreeable, all her movements gracious; nor does she lack that spice of *coquetterie* which women infuse into everything."

The meals described by Brillat-Savarin as healthful and moderate



Mme. Récamier, Brillat-Savarin's cousin, the greatest beauty of the Empire, was famous for chasteness. Portrait by Baron François Gérard.

they were constantly tempted by good food.

Brillat-Savarin emphasized the importance of *gourmandise* to conjugal happiness, noting that married *gourmands* who do not care to sleep together may still have a wonderful time eating together.

He claimed that persons predisposed to *gourmandise* were generally of middle height, with a round or broad face, bright eyes, a small forehead, a short nose, thick lips, a rounded chin; the women were plump, pretty rather than beautiful, with a slight tendency to corpulence.

Here is his description of a woman eating: "Her napkin is prettily tucked in; one hand rests on

seem Gargantuan by modern standards.

Last Days. Brillat-Savarin himself never suffered from indigestion, gallbladder or liver disorders. He died in 1826 at 71 of pneumonia contracted while attending a memorial service for Louis XVI.

Always the scientific observer, he described his last days with meticulous detail: "I have before my eyes an inflammation which does not want to go away and a cold on my chest that shakes me like an earthquake and makes me cough up blood."

Summing Up. By Brillat-Savarin himself: "The true gourmet combines Athenian elegance, Roman luxury and French delicacy." END