

# “Consider the Menu Carefully”: The Dining-Room Tales of Alice B. Toklas

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Marano*

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“Cadmò, che portò la scrittura in Grecia,  
era stato cuoco del re di Sidone.”  
Roland Barthes

## § *Hors d'œuvre*

When in 1958 Harper & Bros. published *Aromas & Flavours of Past and Present*, the book from which my title comes, Alice Babette Toklas was no longer the unknown woman that a quarter of century earlier had puzzled readers as *the person of the screen* in Gertrude Stein's fictionalized autobiography<sup>1</sup>. Eight years after Stein's death, the publication of *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* had turned its seventy-seven year-old beginner author into “a celebrity” (Mellow 473). As we shall see, in 1954 Toklas decided to break the fortress walls of the deep reservedness she prized above all other things for a number of reasons. Once her reputation as a writer was established, however, she was urged to repeat the experiment because of two practical problems: to meet the growing economic needs of her household, and to fulfill the obligations with her publisher, who retained an option on her second book. In fact, she had received from Holt, Rinehart & Winston the offer to write her memoirs, an idea that fascinated her. Since the story of the genesis, false starts and completion of *What Is Remembered* goes beyond the scope of the present article, suffice it to

say that the intriguing account of her life that appeared in 1963 is ultimately unsatisfactory. The reason is that Toklas *had already written* her own autobiography. Reticent as one may expect, surprising because of its unusual setting, it was interspersed among the precious recipes of her first, magnificent cookbook.

Perhaps because of Toklas' limited control over her publications, the titles of her first two volumes are exceptionally misleading. Whereas the inspired *Aromas and Flavours of Past and Present* identifies an almost commonplace "cookbook of which", the author wrote, "I can not be proud" (Steward 229), the matter-of-fact *Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* fascinates the reader as an "unusual example of the genre" (Mellow 473) because of two main assets: it is a "cook book to read" (SoA 222), and it is very well written. Although her unshakable mask of modesty made her belittle the cookbook and pretend it was only business, she was in fact "delighted" (Simon 217), and in 1952 she wrote to Isabel Wilder:

The cook book is started and very soon bending over an imaginary stove will keep the temperature a-mounting and a-mounting" (SoA 264)

Two contrasting instances combined at the moment of planning the volume. On the one hand, Alice was concerned with the problem of preserving her allegiance to her dead companion. A recurrent motif of the letters she wrote in 1946-47 was that she had to hold on in order to carry out her deathbed promise to print all of Gertrude's unpublished manuscripts. Such an absorbing task, of course, admitted of no interference. On the other hand, the challenge of writing a book after years of editing Gertrude's manuscripts appealed to Alice. Having played second fiddle all her public life, she was invariably perceived as the second-best of the couple that run the salon in rue de Fleurus and, later, in rue Christine. Now that "her strong and vital personality emerged from the shadow in which she had deliberately kept it during Gertrude's lifetime" (Steward 86), she seized the opportunity to pay tribute to her beloved through a reversal of roles that would show her prowess as a writer.

Her final decision to embark on the project was probably prompted by the uncharacteristic circumstance that "[t]he idea for a cookbook had come to her and to Gertrude years before Gertrude's death, and there had even been a sketchy plan for a combined cookbook and memory" (Simon 208). Since the cookbook was also Gertrude's, the very act of writing it

would renew Alice's lifelong dialogue with her no less effectively than, say, the forthcoming Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein<sup>2</sup>. Not surprisingly, on 27 September 1947 she wrote with typical understatement to William Garland Rogers,

...*suddenly* it came to me if I could get recipes printed in some magazine I'd be as eligible as Richard Wright - so why not gather my recipes - make the cook book and get a job. (*SoA* 78 - italics mine)

The time that elapsed between Rogers' efforts to find a publisher and Toklas' early jottings before the book "was put together during the first three months of an attack of pernicious jaundice" (*CB* 1) worked in favor of a text that effectively coped with Toklas' divided loyalties. With its "seven chapters includ[ing] 'My life with cook books, My life with cooks, My life with recipes, The history of cooking' and a final chapter entitled 'Eating and not eating, an occupation'" (Simon 260), Stein's original pattern envisioned a blatant duplication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, where the same magic number of internal partitions contributed to the lively rhythm of the book. Together with the alliterative "mingling of recipe and reminiscence" (*CB* 1) and the alternation of past and present that is so typical of Stein's bestseller, Alice's thirteen chapters plus the introductory "A Word with the Cook" suggest that she wrote her gastro-nomic autobiography, so to speak, with four hands.

### § *First course*

Taken for granted that Toklas' supplementary autobiography would be user-unfriendly - if not utterly unpractical - without the "Index of Recipes" provided by Harper's, the question to the fore is how misleading is its title. Of course, the text fulfills the basic requirement of the genre according to which "[a] cookbook can be many different things, depending on its author and its purpose", yet the "one element all are sure to possess is recipes" (Allen 6). Nevertheless, together with a number of real "treasures" - as she titled the very Steinean chapter seven - more often than not the recipes are "too rich and extravagant to be useful to most readers", let alone that, "[n]eglecting even to proofreading her recipes, Alice nearly ruined one dinner party" (Simon 219).

Probably “the manuscript that Alice submitted was not like the neat, carefully typed version she had made of Gertrude’s books” because “the pressure of writing so much in so little time, she explained, precluded her revision” (Simon 219). After all, her sources were “three chateaux manuscript cook books - 18th & early 19th century besides hundreds of later ones” (SoA 30) and in order to obtain a standardized text she had to “reduce the measurements to exact American cup measurements and experiment with substitutes” (SoA 78). Although Alice would have strongly denied it, had she to choose a model between

the Katish Russian cook book which reads so badly has excellent recipes and Mrs. Laverty’s-which reads so gaily-recipes are really unpardonably vile” (SoA 112),

she would have chosen the latter. As a matter of fact, her book was not so much a collection of recipes as a culinary treatise in the wake of Brillat-Savarin’s 1825 masterpiece - which was hardly surprising, since “Brillat Savarin who wrote the greatest book about French eating”, as Stein put it in 1935 (“American Food and American Houses” 84) was also the most accomplished son of the city of Belley, where Gertrude and Alice had spent their summers since 1924 before renting a summer residence in the neighborhood of Bilignin five years later (Mellow 332)<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, one has to understand the relationship between *La physiologie du goût* and *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook à la Stein* - i.e., oblique, fragmentary or allusive at its best. However, right from the opening chapter (“The French Tradition”) Toklas furnishes her readers with a reversed Brillat-Savarin, where her portrait as a female American expatriate purporting the cause of French cuisine is a mirror image of the male transatlantic exile who praises the virtues of the American wild turkey while collecting the memoirs of his stay in Connecticut (Brillat-Savarin 90-97). Stylistically, the most obvious *pendant* to Monsieur Jean-Anthelme’s colloquial manner is the anecdotically digressive mode that distinguished Toklas’ conversation, although of course Alice is far from the astonishing verbal creativity of the Frenchman. Whatever the case, the *Cookbook’s* most daring challenge to *La physiologie du goût* occurs with the crucial question of food-as-culture.

On this point, Toklas masters the three stages of the cultural process of production, preparation and consuming of food (Montanari 7-9) even better than her illustrious forerunner. In the first place, at Bilignin-par-

Belley Alice grew, collected and preserved fruits and vegetables from her two vegetable gardens - an occupation denied to Brillat ever since the seizure of his beloved vineyard in Machura. Secondly, friends who visited the couple in their summer residence noticed the differences between Alice's country cooking and her Paris *cuisine*, since "cooking in town does not admit of so much condimenting, or spicing for that matter" (CB 275)<sup>4</sup>.

Toklas' intertextual networking with *La physiologie du goût* is particularly successful in her mock rewriting of the "episode of the brill", where the master gourmet gives an entertaining account of his dexterity in an emergency situation (Brillat-Savarin 326-329). Enjoying the role of the Galenic cook along such prescriptions as "if one particular food is biased towards the 'hot' then it has to be modified towards the 'cold' sense" (Montanari 65), in chapter three ("Food for Artists") Alice maintains to have prepared a bass for Picasso

according to a theory of my grandmother who had no experience in cooking and who rarely saw her kitchen but who had endless theories about cooking as well as about many other things. She contended that a fish having lived its life in water, once caught, should have no further contact with the element in which it had been born or raised. She recommended that it be roasted or poached in wine or cream or butter. (CB 29)

Less systematically, Brillat-Savarin's meditations become Toklas' half-serious, half tongue-in-cheek speculations about the origin of recipes like the Indo-European cold soup called *gazpacho* in Spain, *chlodnik* in Poland, *tarata* in Greece, and *cacik* in Turkey. The folk-philological ending of chapter five ("Beautiful Soup"), perhaps reminiscent of Stein's love for folk-etymological punning, actually conforms to what historians know about the internationalization of dishes like the *biancomangiare* in the Middle Ages (Montanari 118). Very perceptively, Alice attributed the differences to war:

Yes indeed it was confusing, until one morning it occurred to me that it was evident each one of these frozen soups was not a separate creation. Had the Poles passed the recipe to their enemy the Turks at the siege of Vienna or had it been brought back to Poland much earlier than that from Turkey or Greece? Or had it brought back by a crusader from Turkey? Had it gone to Sicily from Greece and then to Spain? It is a subject to be pursued. (CB 49-50)

Having experienced the power of war on everybody's life, Alice decides to end her story with World War II, when "the first struggle was to keep warm—the rest was to find food" (*SoA* 135) and "[h]ospitality consisted in two cups of tea without sugar, milk or lemon and one cigarette" (*CB* 206). As a result, with her version of the cultural processes of *substitution* and *incorporation* (Montanari 143-152) brought about by war, turns Alice Toklas into a novel Susan Carter who learns frugality in wartime because

[d]uring the occupation *forcément* I became a fairly good and economic cook" (*SoA* 157).

By consciously echoing the pun contained in Stein's projected title for the final chapter of the *Ur-cookbook*, with her "Food in the Bugey during the occupation" Toklas highlights the great adventure of desire (Barthes 266) that her *other autobiography* finally shares with *La physiologie du goût*. It is not by chance, then, that her version of "Eating and not eating, an occupation" is located in chapter 11.

### § *Second course*

The effect of doubling that spreads through the *Cookbook* is generated by the long-distance conversation with the dead that Alice so desperately wished to revive. With her gift-volume, replica of Gertrude's "habit to donate [her] for Christmas a very important cook-book" (*CB* 214), she worships a master repetitioner by repeating not only the narrative of the moments of being that are embedded in Stein's monumental *oeuvre*, but the *oeuvre* itself. Understandably, *The Autobiography* is Alice's main source of inspiration. Yet, since "there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be" (Stein "Portraits and Repetition" 100) in the *Cookbook* recurrence always comes with difference. For example, the beginning of chapter six ("Food to which Aunt Pauline and Lady Godiva led us") performs a double duplication of chapter six of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* ("The War"). With the progress of storytelling, however, Alice frees herself from her model first by extending the time-span of her account to the episodes covered in the following chapter of *The Autobiography*, then by providing the reader with a host of brand new stories.

Toklas treats in like fashion the innumerable passages in Stein's work that more or less directly address the subject of food. Gertrude's unusually straightforward discussions of food habits and cuisine in texts like "American Food and American Houses" (1935) and *Paris France* (1938), for instance, provide Alice with a subtext of shared opinions that reverberate from the two opening chapters, respectively devoted to "The French Tradition" and "Food on French Homes", to chapters eight and nine ("Food in the United States in 1934 and 1935" and "Little-known French Dishes suitable for American and British Kitchens"). Needless to say, the *Cookbook* tends to multiply the references, a case in point being the recipe for *Crème Carême*<sup>5</sup>, where mention of the famous French chef that in *Paris France* Gertrude describes as "the creator of present French cooking" (49) also sends the reader back to Stein's early portrait "Micareme" (1912).

Among the allusions to works other than the *Autobiography*, the one contained in chapter four deserves to be singled out. "Murder in the Kitchen", which had been the imaginative "title she suggested to Harper's for the entire book" (Simon 220), starts Toklas' meditation on the acknowledgement that "cooking is not an entirely agreeable pastime" (*CB* 37) with a potent echo of Stein's *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*. In the summer of 1933, the booklet had been Stein's main attempt to overcome her anxiety after the triumph of the *Autobiography* had stopped her "practice of daily writing" and thrown her in a state of "personal confusion over success, fame, money, and identity" (Dydo 561). Written at "the depth of the Great Depression" (Dydo 561), the story is centered on a tragedy occurred at the Hôtel Pernollet in Belley<sup>6</sup> where Gertrude and Alice had stayed during their first tour of the region. The familiar setting of the event (Madame Pernollet was found dying in the courtyard of her hotel), the circumstance that the victim was the wife of the hotelkeeper who was also a distinguished cook, and the overwhelming power of naked death presented Toklas with the opportunity to conjure up a cluster of motifs around which she could organise the whole *Cookbook*. With its sparkling opening paragraph - in fact, a real beginning that years later will resonate in Margaret Atwood's introductory notes to *The CanLit Foodbook* (1987)<sup>7</sup>, Alice immediately establishes the tone for the text to come:

Cook-books have always intrigued and seduced me. When I was still a dilettante in the kitchen they held my attention, even the dull ones, from cover to cover, the way crime and murder stories did Gertrude Stein. (CB 37)

Amusing as it may be, the statement introduces the reader to the daring simile through which Toklas sets up the foundation of her authoriality with no less authority than her famous companion:

When we first began reading Dashiell Hammett, Gertrude Stein remarked that it was his modern note to have disposed of his victims before the story commenced. Goodness knows how many were required to follow as the result of the first crime. And so it is in the kitchen. (CB 37)

The death of the hero being the actual proviso of modern fiction well beyond the detective story - so that at a certain point the central character of Stein's mammoth novel *The Making of Americans* dies for no apparent reason -, Alice's *Bildung* as a writer cannot but start with the irrevocable loss of her beloved:

Murder and sudden death seem as unnatural there as they should be anywhere else. They can't, they can never become acceptable facts. Food is far too pleasant to combine with horror. All the same, facts, even distasteful facts, must be accepted and we shall see how, before any story of cooking begins, crime is inevitable. (CB 37)

Once the *story of cooking* has begun, however, there will be no turning back, and Alice's elaboration of mourning is free to take its own course.

### § (Un)Dressing

On the surface, the *Cookbook* collects words, ideas, stories and even "Recipes from Friends" (chapter twelve) in the light conversational tone that Stein had successfully reproduced in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. At a deeper level, however, the sensuous text beneath its skin suggests otherwise. A belated Victorian in both education and manners, Toklas was always reticent about the presence of sexual nuances in Stein's work. She might have conceded that the title of *Tender Buttons* (1914) perhaps referred to her own passion for buttons, which as a child she used to collect (Simon 8). Yet Alice would have never admitted that it introduced an encrypted love poem by playing with a bilingual pun on *boutons* ("nip-

ples”) or, for that matter, that section two was Stein’s first serious attempt to exploit the eroticism of food. In the *Cookbook*, Alice never rivals the verbal ingenuity of “Food”, where the constant shifting of the twin semantic fields provides a bridge between eating and loving<sup>8</sup>. Yet, unable to resist its lure, occasionally she exploits the menu-like format of Stein’s little text to produce suggestive mimetic renditions of Gertude’s stunning “dissociative rhetoric” (Bloom 1). For instance,

#### PASTRY.

Cutting shades, cool spades and little last beds, make violet, violet them. (Stein *Tender Buttons* 54)

#### COUPE GRIMALDI

Fresh pineapple cut in inch squares is macerated in kirsch for 1 hour, drained, placed in a glass and covered with mandarin orange or tangerin *sorbet*, decorated with sweetened but unflavoured whipped cream and crystallised violets. (*CB* 189)

In her elegant dry prose, Alice contented herself with the patient task of putting back into context those nouns through which, by means of “using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing” them (“Poetry and Grammar” 138) Stein encrypted her love song. It will take the missed opportunity of *Aromas and Flavours of Past and Present* to get rid of her self-restrained discipline and grant herself the freedom to advise her readers to

[c]onsider the menu carefully, that there is a harmony and a suitable progression, as you do for the arrangement of a bouquet or of the planting of a bed of flowers. *In the menu there should be a climax and a culmination. Come to it gently. One will suffice*” (24 - italics mine)

#### § *De(s)sert*

When Stein was alive, Alice was first and foremost the proofreader and editor of Gertude’s manuscripts, and at a certain point even her publisher. Then, of course, she was her secretary, letter-writer, householder and cook. After Stein’s death, Toklas was faced with a dilemma. Was she going to fulfill her gift for storytelling by securing it on the page? She tried and success came. Pleased as she was, however, she decided to relinquish her new career and devote her last days to her lifelong passion.

Characteristically, even the official autobiography *What Is Remembered* sees Alice's portrait disappear behind the incommensurable presence of Gertrude.

Yet the odds were that Toklas would become a talented writer. In chapter six of the *Cookbook*, for instance, she traces a map of the places she visited in Gertrude's cars between the two world wars. "Food to which Aunt Pauline and Lady Godiva led us", then, easily falls within the very special category of travel writing that Edith Wharton labelled "the motor-flight". Indeed, the *Cookbook's* longest chapter reads like a fancy version of Edith Wharton's *A Motor-Flight through France* (1908) where Alice wittily imagines that the vehicles had a conscience of their own:

On our trip back to Paris Godiva [Stein's first Ford Model T] was no longer inspired. It was we who were obliged to take the initiative. As we were in haste we took no time to go out of the way to discover new places. We contended ourselves with the tried-and-not-found wanting than which there is nothing more deadly. Once in Paris she returned to her competent leadership. (CB 84)

In the opening sentence of Wharton's book, a chronicle of three car trips in the country (that on one occasion included Alice's favorite author, Henry James), Wharton writes that "The motor-car has restored the romance of travelling" (17). By substituting gastronomic guides to maps and Baedekers<sup>9</sup>, then restaurants for cathedrals and menus for paintings and frescoes<sup>10</sup>, Alice gives a memorable account of her own romance with Gertrude that is every bit as good as Wharton's report.

Retrospectively, then, readers of the *Cookbook* are left with at least two appetites: one is for Alice's dishes, the other is for her untold tales. We can comment on her choice by simply agreeing on a passage from the *Cookbook* where in punning Steinean fashion she maintains "This, a matter *too literally of taste*, is not arguable" (139 - italics mine). Or we can reflect on - and regret - the bitter humour that closes her work on the archetypal image of the garden:

Our final, definite leaving of the garden came one cold winter day, all too appropriate to our feelings and the state of the world. A sudden moment of sunshine peopled the gardens with all the friends and others who had passed through them. Ah, there would be another garden, the same friends, possibly, or no, probably new ones, and there would be other stories to tell and to hear. And so we left Bilignin, never to return.

And now it amuses me to remember that the only confidence I ever gave was given twice, in the upper garden, to two friends. The first one gaily responded How very amusing. The other<sup>11</sup> asked with no little alarm, But Alice, have you ever tried to write. As if a cook-book had anything to do with writing. (*CB* 280)



- 1 Toklas was totally unknown outside the Left Bank until Stein published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933. Amazingly, she managed to keep a low profile even after Stein's lecture tour organized by the publisher to promote the book. Between 1934 and 1935 she was so invisible that newspapermen failed to recognize her and even misspelled her name as "Annie B. Toklas" (Simon 163). Strange as it may seem, the same happened at Stein's salon in Paris. In his letters, for instance, Ernest Hemingway referred to her as "Miss Tocraz" even before his break with Stein that followed a quarrel with Alice (Simon 119).
- 2 The edition saw the light between 1951 and 1958 under the joint efforts of Carl Van Vechten and Thornton Wilder.
- 3 Ulla Dydo points out that "[i]n the late summer of 1927, one hundred years after Brillat-Savarin's death, a statue of him was erected in Belley, followed by extended festivities" (205). In addition to that, "the presiding deity of the region" (Mellow 313) is referred to in two of Stein's creative text; directly, in *Lucy Church Amiably* (1931), the book that inaugurated the Plain Edition adventure in self-publication which in a letter to Carl Van Vechten Stein described as a "business" where "Alice is the imaginary editor and I am the author" (Ford 236); indirectly, in *Madame Recamier* (1932), since "Monsieur Récamier was a cousin of the gastronome Brillat-Savarin, related to Stein's young landlady, "Mlle Duvachat" [...], who also appears in the text" (Dydo 452).
- 4 Friends who joined in the "several picnic lunches - if it wasn't [sic] too cold Gertrude preferred it" (*SoA* 48) would also appreciate the difference between Alice's fastidious presentation of dishes at home and the informal atmosphere of cold chicken or roastbeef sandwiches and caramellised apples cheerfully disposed of on the grass (*CB* 77-78).
- 5 "a dessert created by Carême, the great early-nineteenth century cook who wrote several of the most important French cook-books" (*CB* 163).
- 6 Rumors had it that she had either fallen from the roof while she was sleepwalking, or she had committed suicide. However remote was the circumstance, Stein thought that she might have been assassinated.
- 7 With a slight change in the choice of her term for comparison, the Canadian writer with a passion for detective stories writes: "I am one of those people who read cookbooks the way other people read travel writing. I may not ever make the recipe, but it's fun to read about it, to speculate on what kind of people would" (Atwood 1).

- 8 “In Stein’s world,” according to Ulla Dydo, the related word *tenderness* “is connected with Toklas” (87).
- 9 [At this time] a series of booklets on the gastronomic points of interest in the various regions of France were being published. As each one appeared I would read it with curiosity. The author was paradoxically a professional *gourmet*. Of the places we knew I was not always in agreement with his judgement. However, when it became time to plan the route we were to take to meet the Picassos at Antibes we chose one based on the recommendations of the guides” (CB 90).
- 10 “The Côte d’Or then had as its proprietor and *chef* a quite fabulous person. First of all *he looked like a great Clouet portrait, a museum piece*. He had great experience and knowledge of the history of French cooking from the time of Clouet to the present. From him I learned a great deal. At dinner that evening we realised that he was one of the great French *chefs*. Each dish had a simplicity and a perfection. *Comparing the cooking of a dish to the painting of a picture, it has always seemed to me that however much the cook or painter did to cover any weakness would not in the least avail*. Such devices would only emphasize the weakness. There was no weak spot in the food prepared by the chef at the Hotel de la Côte d’Or” (CB 78-9 - italics mine).
- 11 The one is probably William Garland Rogers, writer and friend who helped Toklas find a publisher for the cookbook. The other is more easily identified: “I once told Thornton Wilder I was going to write a cook book. [...] He looked at me surprised and said reprovingly-But Alice have you ever tried to write” (SoA 30).



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