

Eating in the Eyes of the Notary :

Food and Dining Tables in North Isère in the 18th century from After-Death Surveys



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“French peasants in modern times have been dying of hunger, literally and figuratively, since the 1950s in the work of historians”

(QUELLIER, F. (2006). “Le repas de funéraires de Bonhomme Jacques. Faut-il reconsidérer le dossier de l'alimentation paysanne des Temps modernes ?”, in *Food & History*, vol.6, n°1, p. 22)

Introduction

Driven by the initial desire to work on French gastronomy, I was finally oriented by my dissertation director towards the study of the daily diet of rural people in North Isère, from the humblest to the most affluent. This approach, beyond the fact of studying a population that had lived in a “bien-connu” territory, allowed me to take an interest in a framework that is often ignored by cultural history and thus, the history of food and gastronomy: rural areas. Indeed, over the last sixty years of research on the “table of the French”, studies on the rural world have begun to be somewhat dated and stereotyped, often similar to the methodology of the *École des Annales*, while approaches on larger cultural areas or on urban and aristocratic settings seem to be constantly renewed. For a good reason, sources on rural areas are less abundant and much rarer. Thus, even if we have seen a renewed interest in rural food since the 2000s, it is still very complex to make the history of food coexist in the midst of a cultural turnaround, since the 1980s thanks to Jean-Louis Flandrin, and rural history. This contributed to the poverty-stricken vision of rural food that the work has long maintained. From this postulate, beyond the objective of reconstructing the rural diet of the time, we especially wanted to see if it was possible to write the history of food in a restricted rural framework, in other words, in the villages of North Isère; and to reconcile the said framework with a history from which it is relatively excluded..



Map locating the territory of North Isère in 18th century France (<https://mcarte.ign.fr/>; Brazon B.)

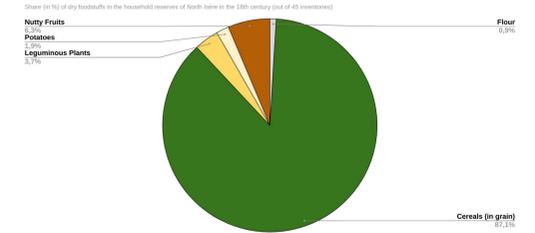


Jean-Baptiste OUDRY, *Nature morte : lièvre, canard, pain, fromage et flacons de vin*, 1742, Louvre Museum, Paris (Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raouf)

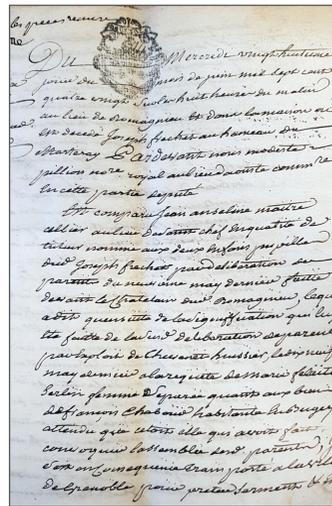
Results

In spite of the shortcomings of after-death surveys, particularly in capturing food items purely and simply, or quantifying what was intended for household consumption and not for sale or royalties, we were finally able to propose an idea of the rural diet at the time. At first glance, this does not seem to differ from the observations known and recognized for a long time in history: there is a probable domination of cereals, and therefore bread, supplemented by a contribution of legumes and vegetables through the soup. At the same time, the quantities of wine found could suggest its importance as a drink, given the absence of an (alcoholic) alternative in the reserves or the impossible quantification of water, which is essential in the making of bread, soup or wine. We support the classical theses on rural food on this point.

38383,08
 This is the number of liters found in the reserves through our procedures. That's almost 853 liters per household!
 This does not necessarily mean that the wine is totally consumed by the household, but its domestic production may suggest its importance the daily caloric intake.



As for material data, often exploited through social distribution, they have shown a varied sensitivity to cooking techniques, products and table manners. Indeed, cooking utensils have for example suggested the much more frequent place of meat and fish in the noble, ecclesiastical or bourgeois diet through the presence of drip pans, skewers, etc.. Other instruments, such as the recent casserole, or pies, terrines suggest the penetration of a more technical bourgeois cuisine, sometimes close to the professional environment, even to the country housewife. Finally, the strong presence of dishes and the multiplication of cutlery demonstrate the growing role of intermediaries between the kitchen and the consumer at the table. If this last phenomenon of individualization of the meal tends to become generalized even in rural society, it is above all the prerogative of the elites, who do not hesitate to show their power by a prestigious and rich staging. Finally, the central place of the household as a production unit (although the domestic unit is not self-sufficient) has made it possible to reveal the presence of small foodstuffs that could be part of the diet or economic circuits. While the garden and orchard demonstrate the production of vegetables and fruits, we have especially noted a relatively important place of the farmyard and the stable, which allowed rural people to supplement the traditional diet, and to accompany bread with eggs and dairy products. It was of course impossible to quantify their real contribution to the diet, especially since they are products frequently taken to local markets



First page of the inventory of Joseph Fricchet's property in Romagnieu (PILLION, Modeste, 3E16890, 1780); departmental archives of Isère

Materials and Methods

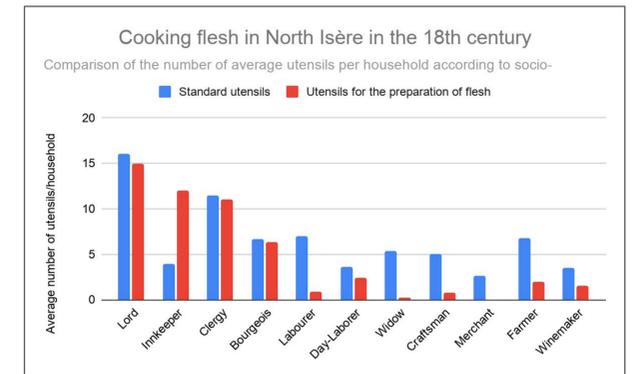
For this, we have relied on one type of source: after-death surveys. These are the handwritten results of expert appraisals made in the presence of a notary following a death. The household has recourse to this type of procedure when the succession of property cannot be discreetly ensured (guardianship, family conflict, etc.). The initial objective was to gather a sufficient critical mass, estimated with our director at about fifty of inventory, in order to obtain a representative panel of the rural society of the time and if possible spread over the whole geographical area in order to capture all its particularities. Finally, we constituted a set of 45 inventories, unequally distributed in the territory and in the century (with a documentation much more present in the second half of the 18th century), but which made it possible to analyze as much the households of lords as those of the most precarious peasants, including craftsmen, the bourgeois and clerics.

Beyond the contextualization elements gathered for each inventory (date, notary, profession or social group of the deceased, reason for the procedure, etc.), the data gathered was generally limited to objects, furniture, and more rarely foodstuffs, from daily life that could be associated with our subject. Several hundred or even thousands of objects, nearly 809 animals, or some 38,000 liters of wine and 47,000 liters of cereal grains were thus used to feed this study, sometimes distributed geographically, and above all among the various social classes identified. The statistical and serial approach via excel proved to be indispensable for the exploitation of these data.

The panel at the end of the counting :
 - 45 households
 - 11 socio-professional categories represented
 - 77.8% of procedures completed in the second half of the 18th century
 - 24 villages or localities represented



Two centuries before the granting of the PDO label for walnuts of Grenoble, the walnut already has a major place in the landscape and reserves of North Isère, it provides more than a raw food, oil to feed the preparations of rural people. Is it a sign of the existence of a well-established regional cuisine?



Discussion

Is it therefore possible to reconcile rural history with the history of food? In any case, sources for observing the rural world do not seem to be sparing with in providing data. Jean-Bernard René had already demonstrated the legitimacy of wills and marriage contracts to record some of the essential elements of the rural diet through pensions in 1969. In our case, after-death surveys made it possible to occasionally seize some rather varied foodstuffs, but especially to enter the rural kitchen by means of objects and materiality. We also notice the whole interest of a study on a limited space, allowing the observation of local gastronomic and cultural specificities (as for example the importance of the walnut as a food product in our case). But this second remark is not unique to our source, it only demonstrates the importance of micro-history.

However, if it proves to be quite possible to reconstruct the diet of the time and to put forward numerous hypotheses related to the theme of food, the multiplication of prisms to constitute our reasoning is a real problem. Indeed, our source coldly treating the whole living environment in a funeral context, it is difficult to have a direct and totally realistic vision of the rural kitchen or table. We have to take into consideration the probable disappearance of objects, incomplete inventory procedures or the quasi-systematic absence of foodstuffs. We therefore see the limitations of a single source type for the credibility of our conclusions. Moreover, the heterogeneous distribution of our panel in time and space also poses a problem concerning the observed phenomena and the theses we put forward.

In view of the results obtained from our study, and considering the limits of our source, we now wish to extend our future work to new sources in a logic of questioning. Moreover, certain questions remain unresolved by limiting ourselves to after-death surveys: it remains difficult to estimate, for example, the place of spices and seasonings in rural cooking; and after-death surveys have remained evasive on cultivated vegetables, the precise composition of bread, or even meats specifically used in cooking. Therefore, through the only means of after-death surveys, we relate a rather stereotypical vision of the diet, supported by our bibliography. We can legitimately ask ourselves whether the historian's poverty-oriented vision of the rural world is a reality, or whether the gastronomic phenomena observed on a national scale is adapted to a restricted rural setting (North Isère or the province of Dauphiné).

Although limited, after-death surveys are quite legitimate in the context of a study on food, offering valuable data that should be exploited. In addition, this type of source can, beyond the kitchen, provide broader information on the living environment of a particular time and social group.

Some references :

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