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PERSONALITIES

Roundtable: The French Paradox

The French diet is back in the news—how do French women manage to enjoy chocolate, wine, cheese and bread without gaining weight? Food writer **JOSH FRIEDLAND** enlists several top French food bloggers for a rollicking conversation on the phenomenon.

ON NOV. 17, 1991, CBS'S "60 MINUTES" BROADCAST A REPORT ON THE correlation between French consumption of red wine and lower rates of heart disease. The segment popularized and legitimized the "French paradox"—the counterintuitive notion that a French diet of cheese, chocolate, and wine could be associated with improved cardiovascular health. Scores of Americans immediately went running to wine stores during the four weeks following the broadcast, resulting in a 44 percent increase in sales of red wine in U.S. supermarkets.

Fast forward to 13 years later, and the paradox has surged back into the American popular consciousness in the guise of a diet book. Equal parts memoir, self-help guide, and cookbook, the hugely popular *French Women Don't Get Fat* (Alfred A. Knopf, \$22) by Mireille Guiliano, promises to reveal the mysteries behind French eating habits, weight gain, and "the secret of eating for pleasure."

Ms. Guiliano's common-sense dietary prescriptions include eating in moderation, following dining rituals, cooking with fresh ingredients, shunning processed foods, drinking lots of water, and walking as exercise.

American dieters, besieged by the restrictions of low-carbohydrate diets, are, literally, hungry for Ms. Guiliano's instructions on how to enjoy bread, cheese, chocolate, and wine while still looking like Brigitte Bardot. Since *French Women Don't Get Fat* was published in December, the book rose to as high as no. 2 on the *New York Times* Hardcover Advice bestseller list.

But how do real French women think about food? And are Americans all that different from their French counterparts when it comes to dining habits? To explore these ideas, the book, and the similarities and differences between French and American food cultures, I gathered four French food bloggers for an online roundtable conversation, conducted via email.

The Contributors

Born in Morocco and raised in Paris since the age of five, **Requia Badr** publishes her blog Chez Requia from her home in Colombes, France.

Clotilde Dusoulier is a software engineer making a transition to a new career around food and writing. A lifelong Parisian, she recently lived for two years in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has published Chocolate & Zucchini since September 2003.

In 2002, **Estelle Tracy**, a native of France, traded the Paris suburbs for the suburbs of Philadelphia, where she lives with her husband. She has published her blog Le hamburger et le croissant since June 2004.

Pascale Weeks writes her blog C'est moi qui l'ai fait from Nogent Sur Marne, on the outskirts of Paris. You can also find her at Arts-Culinaires.com, a French food site.

The Conversation

Josh Friedland: To start off, Americans are fascinated with the idea that French women are able to enjoy wine, cheese, pastries, and chocolate, yet they “don’t get fat.” Does this image of French women and their eating habits ring true?

Requia Badr: French people won’t say that. For me this doesn’t really ring false, but it’s just very incomplete and simplified, or let’s say it needs to be qualified. Of course, French women are able to enjoy wine, cheese, pastries, and chocolate, and they don’t get fat, but it’s mainly due to the fact that we eat and drink in small quantities.

I remember the last time I traveled to Los Angeles. We had a breakfast in a restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, and a friend ordered for us a French pastry (just to taste the French pastries cooked by an American chef), an almond croissant. I was really amazed by the size of the croissant and I was unable to finish it! I think in France, the same piece will be called a “GIANT” almond croissant!

The truth is that we are not different from other women in other countries. We just have some different eating habits: If we eat pastries in the afternoon, automatically we will have a lighter dinner, or when we eat chocolate, we avoid drinking sodas at the same time.

Really, I’m not sure any woman in the world can eat and drink everything in large portions throughout the day without getting fat—or this woman is really lucky!

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Pascale Weeks: Yes, it rings perfectly true to me and it could be nearly the list of my favorite foods. As I love food, I've got some tiny rules which help me.

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I eat chocolate nearly every day, but only a small amount and only good quality chocolate like Valrhona, for example.

I really enjoy wine and I drink some once or twice a week. On the other hand, I never drink any other alcohol.

I love cheese, but not at the end of a meal as I find it too rich. I eat cheese mostly for lunch with a bowl of soup and a piece of good bread.

Even if I love pastries, I only eat them when I have friends for dinner (home-made pastries) or when I go to a restaurant for dinner if I'm sure it's made by the restaurant. I also love croissants, but I have one only once a week. Of course, if I go by Pierre Herme or Laduree (one of the most famous "patisserie" in Paris), I might go for a *macaron*. I rarely eat pastries which are not home-made and rarely pastries with cream.

Clotilde Dusoulier: Before I start, the obligatory disclaimer: I am not every woman in France and have conducted no scientific study of their behavior, so I only speak humbly from my own experience and observations.

First of all, not all French women are slim: Our obesity rate may be lower, but it is creeping up. It would also be a mistake to think that we are all happy with our weight and serene about our eating habits: If you ask around, many women will tell you that they have X kilos to lose (whether or not that's objectively true), and many of them are on a perpetual diet or semi-diet, watching what they eat and worrying that they've eaten too much.

Other than that, I think the secret lies in one word (and a hyphenated one at that): self-discipline. Most of us will allow ourselves a splurge from time to time, but not every day, and we'll try to compensate by eating less the next day and exercising regularly. We will indulge in wine, cheese, and chocolate, but will restrain ourselves (however much we want that extra slice of *tarte tatin*) and stop at a reasonable serving. And when we notice we've put on a couple of pounds or more, the panic attack is optional, but we will cut down on sweets, unnecessary fat, and alcohol until we're back where we feel comfortable. This technique works and seems to be profoundly built into our behavior (we've seen our mothers and our friends do it), but I don't think it comes easily to anyone and it requires daily attention. But then again whoever said life was an all-you-can-eat buffet?

As far as I'm concerned, there's also the foodie factor: There are a lot of things that I just won't eat because they're too processed and full of preservatives and nasty, and I'm just not interested in them. I like things to be fresh and tasty and carefully prepared, so that keeps me away from a lot of things that wouldn't be very good for me.

And, of course, favorable circumstances also come into play. Many of us in France lead "naturally active" lives, especially in cities, running this way and that and using our feet and public transportation to go around because a car would just get you stuck in traffic: I myself walk for 40 minutes every day just to go to and from work, and there are tons of stairs in the metro. Portions are way, way smaller in [French] packaged goods and at restaurants, and there is quite simply less processed or convenience food to purchase in grocery stores.

JF: In different ways, each of you touched on some of the main themes in *French Women Don't Get Fat*—that French women are much more aware of portion size, that they tend to avoid processed foods, that they stick to three meals a day, and that they strive to maintain a balanced diet. There's nothing genetic about the French paradox, the author argues. Rather, French women have a system of *trucs* (which she defines as a collection of well-honed tricks) that keep them thin. What are your *trucs*, if any?

CD: I'm not sure if these qualify as *trucs*, but here are a few rules I try to stick to (with exceptions of course):

- I make sure I eat vegetables at every meal (potatoes don't count!) and fruit for breakfast.
- After a nice (read: plentiful) meal, I wait for the feeling of hunger to come back before I eat again, and I generally try to avoid eating "just because it's time."
- I read the labels on the things I buy and stick to foods that are good quality and not too processed—I stick to what I would call "real food."
- I keep enough ingredients on hand to whip up a quick and healthy meal, so that if I am very hungry there's always an easy but good-for-you option.
- I rarely bake without a special occasion, when I have friends to help me eat whatever it is I've baked.
- When I plan a meal for a dinner party, if one of the courses is rich, the other two will be light(er).
- I don't eat a cookie/cake/pastry just because it's there: I figure if I'm going to eat that kind of thing, it's got to be the best and the freshest I can find.

RB: As far as I'm concerned, I try to eat everything I like and to compensate this "pleasure." Looking at my eating habits and looking at the people around me, especially at work (I work in the fashion field), the main *trucs* are:

- We try to eat at regular time, and we try to avoid snacking between the meals. Sometimes we just don't have time for a correct lunch because of a huge amount of work but anyway we try to eat good products instead of sandwiches or fast food. In Paris, we can find more and more sort of "healthy" fast-foods like Cojean, a new fast-food restaurant where the design is very trendy, very zen, and quite minimalist.
- Talking about grocery stores, I think the other *truc* is also that we cook quite often to better control our food, to eat good food, and to have a real meal based on the other meals we had during the day.
- We walk quite a lot compared maybe to some cities in the U.S. I remember the day I was walking on Third Street in Los Angeles and three different cars stopped and the drivers asked "What happened? Are you OK?" This couldn't occur in France because we are accustomed to walking. If I take my own example, when I can avoid taking the bus or the metro I do it, and anyway, even taking the metro, we walk a lot from a line to another.
- For me the *main* *truc* is that we also drink a lot of water instead of sodas. In France, we are very fond of mineral water and we can find a lot of different types in the stores. By the way, in Paris we can also find "water bars" in some trendy restaurants or trendy shops. More and more different kind of waters are launched every year maybe to face a high demand for these products.

If I can give an example to illustrate this, it can be this one: My best friend lives in the U.S. If she wakes up at 3 a.m. and can't sleep anymore, she used to go to the fridge, take the giant ice-cream pot and have some in front of the TV. In the same circumstances, I'll have a glass of fresh water!

ET: Oh, yes, I have a whole set of rules that I try to stick to, and hopefully people won't think I torture myself after reading them!

First, I would like to mention that I don't forbid myself from eating any kinds of foods, unlike people on diets. I allow myself to have pastries and chocolate in reasonable quantities, since I have noticed that when "naughty" foods are permitted, you crave them much less.

Like Clotilde, I have three meals a day, and I usually have dinner with my husband, preferably not in front of TV! I rarely snack, unless I really am hungry. If I do, usually in the midmorning or around 4 p.m.—the time for *goûter* (afternoon snack) in France—I eat a fruit or drink a big cup of tea, in order to feel full and last until lunch or dinner. I often eat at the same time every day. Unlike most Americans, my husband and I have a relatively late dinner, around 7:30 or 8. I don't like the idea of having dinner too early, as you may be hungry before going to bed. However, I try not to eat anything within the two hours before going to bed. One thing I should point out is that my husband is a small eater, so I am never tempted to eat too much at a meal.

Almost everything I eat is homemade. We must buy a box of Oreo cookies once a year at most, that's it! Processed food is usually less satisfying than homemade, so I try to cook and bake as much as I can. If I don't have enough time to cook, I always have some pasta and a good tomato sauce in my pantry.

I stick to my rules pretty closely on weekdays, but I am a little more relaxed on weekends. Also, when I go to the restaurant, I try not to be the soup-and-salad kind of diner. I want to treat myself and enjoy a good meal that I won't be able to make at home. Although my parents always encouraged me to finish my plate when I was a kid, I rarely try to finish it in American restaurants, where portions are much bigger. It was a tough habit to break, but now I am used to bringing a doggy-bag home.

I do not exercise much, but I try to walk every day around lunch time. Besides, I do vacuum at home. If you are not convinced it is exercise, feel free to show up at my place and clean all the rooms!

JF: Estelle mentioned her preference against eating in front of the television. Dinner in front of the TV—an activity which would seem pretty normal for many Americans—is forbidden in *French Women Don't Get Fat* (along with reading the newspaper while eating). The author says that these habits encourage distraction and should be avoided in favor of practicing dining rituals, such as three-course meals and using “real” plates and napkins, that are ingrained in French traditions of *les arts de la table*. Do you adhere to certain rituals when you eat at home? And do you ever eat in front of the TV?

PW: As a family of two adults and two children, we never have a meal in front of the TV. I don't even know why. I guess it's not very convenient to have a proper meal on a coffee table. Dining rituals are very important in our family. It's usually during these meals that the children talk about what they've done at school, problems they might have with friends and so on. Unless we have dinner parties, we do not usually have a three-course meal, but rather one main course and fruits or yogurt. About plates: When I watch an American movie, I always find it very exotic when they have Chinese food directly from the box. So in our family, we always have meals on real plates.

We do have routines we didn't really have when we were just a couple. We all have breakfast together. It doesn't last long (10 to 15 minutes) but we all enjoy it. We don't eat lunch at home during the week. The children and I have a snack when they come back from school. Mostly, during the week, the children have their dinner together. Later, I have dinner with my husband. When we can (maybe once a fortnight) we all eat together.

On weekends we eat our meals all together and we really like it. We eat all our meals in the kitchen, and I could not imagine having them in front of the TV. We do watch TV, especially the children, but they're not allowed to take food outside of the kitchen. We always switch off TV while we're eating. During breakfast, we listen to the news on the radio.

As I write this, it sounds very traditional, but it's true that when you have children, you need to have a stable environment.

As I work from home, I have my lunch alone twice a week. When the weather is nice, I have it outside. Otherwise, it's in the kitchen, but I must admit that I sometimes read a magazine at the same time. But, don't tell my family!

ET: Growing up, we never ate any meal in front of TV, but always together, as a family. Now that I live with my husband, I tend to do the same thing: We have breakfast and dinner together in the dining room. Although we never have breakfast in front of TV, we sometimes eat dinner while watching *Seinfeld*. This mostly happens when we have leftovers or when we come tired from work—sometimes both. However, I have noticed that when the meal has been carefully prepared, I want it to be the central attraction. In that case, it is important that we have dinner at the table, not in front of TV.

I grew up in a family which was respectful of food, where bread was an essential part of the meal and plates just had to be emptied. I always thought it was important to be thankful for our food, and I like that my husband and I both finish our plates. It is very important to me to eat dinner at the table, because dinner is the time when people relax and get a chance to communicate. When I was a kid, I would always tell my day to my parents during dinner, and I keep doing it now with my husband. Dinner is usually the only time when people gather and get a chance to really communicate. Once the meal's eaten, everyone gets busy doing homework, laundry, or dishwashing. Family dinners are family binders. That's why it's so important not to make a habit of eating in front of the TV.

RB: Actually during the week, the dinner is the only moment I can eat together at home with my husband. We always set the table with nice plates, napkins, etc., and we try to make time to enjoy dinner. It's really important to make time for the dinner instead of eating in a few minutes and watching the TV for the whole evening after. These "rituals" are really important because once again it's the only moment during the day we can really communicate, and I don't think this can be possible if the TV is switched on. We can also really appreciate our dinner, appreciate what we cooked. These rituals are also important to me because at home with my parents dinner was an important moment: All the family was gathered round the dinner.

CD: I think my main focus is to make my environment as pleasant as I can before I start eating, so I can properly enjoy my meal. I make sure I am comfortably seated in a nice atmosphere, with everything I'm going to need on hand—silverware, water,

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condiments, napkin. And I have no rule whatsoever against doing something else while I eat. In fact, I am usually doing something else while I eat, whether it's talking with my dining companion(s), reading a book or a magazine if I'm alone, or even (gasp!) watching TV or a DVD—as long as it's something I (or we) truly enjoy. My favorite way of spending an evening on my own is to eat a carefully home-cooked dinner for one, while watching *Sex and the City*. And a little chocolate rounds this out beautifully. In my opinion this just heightens the pleasure of the moment, and it doesn't draw my attention away from the food—but then drawing my attention away from food does take a huge deal of effort!

JF: The American fantasies about the French and their food stretch from their eating habits to how they go about shopping and cooking. Is the image of French people going to the markets every morning and buying everything fresh just a myth? Are they, in reality, just as likely to go to the supermarket to shop for food?

CD: I think this is mostly a myth, based on a truth from a long, long time ago. What a lot of French people do nowadays is diversify their sources for food: They will buy most things at the grocery store, some from their local shops or at the market (bread, meat, fish, produce, cheese, wine), and some from local producers even (if they live in a region where there are any). But since most of these things are available from the grocery store (and some supermarkets have a very good selection of fresh products), many people do all of their shopping there because it's more convenient.

I do some of my shopping at the grocery store, but I try to support my local food shops by buying from them what they are specialized in. For instance, I would rather buy cheese from the *fromagerie*, meat from the *boucherie*, and produce from the open-air market than buy them at the grocery store: It is more time-consuming (several stops vs. just one) and usually more expensive (though not always), but the products are better-quality and I enjoy the advice and human contact.

ET: When I was still living at my parents', we used to go grocery shopping every Saturday. In the morning, we would go to the *marche* (open-air market where local producers sell their fruits and vegetables) to buy some produce. Then, we would go to the grocery store to get our pantry items, plus some fruits and vegetables as they would be sometimes cheaper than at the *marche*.

Overall, I think that most French people do not go to the markets every day—unless they are retired and are lucky enough to have such markets open every day! Even though French people are, in my opinion, pickier than the Americans about their food, they don't have much more time to devote to their shopping. It is, however, true that open-air markets are popular in France, and it is customary for people to buy their produce there. The food is usually fresher and the contact with the sellers friendlier than at the grocery store. But since grocery stores are usually cheaper than *marches*, lots of people actually buy their produce or their meat in supermarkets.

In the U.S., *marches* don't exist, and butcher shops and bakeries are not common either, so the only option is really to go to the grocery store. I have been in various farmers' markets several times, but the quality was disappointing and prices were a little too high for me.

There is no cafeteria at my workplace, and I am lucky enough to work almost across from a Whole Foods market. I usually have lunch there and shop a little every day. Contrary to France, milk is pasteurized in the U.S., which actually forces you to do some shopping a couple of times a week! [French milk products are treated using ultra-high-temperature pasteurization, a process that renders them shelf-stable, unopened, for months.—eds.] I think that produce is really expensive in American grocery stores, but fortunately I found produce markets, which are much cheaper than grocery stores. That's the only way for me to eat healthy and cheap! I am still searching for a good baguette, though...

RB: I buy fresh products as often as I can. Every Sunday morning we use to go to market and buy fresh fruits and fresh vegetables for the next week and meat for the following days. I never buy meat or bread in the supermarket, but only at the butcher and the bakery. I took this habit from my mum because when I was younger, the market was the funny moment I used to spend with my mum. What's more, my father is, let's say, a "gardening" addict, so we always ate fresh fruits and vegetables at home, and I try to keep this good habit today in my own home with my husband.

PW: Of course, I can only answer for myself. It's true that we have a lot of markets here in France. Each town—even small towns have their own market at least twice a week. When I was working I used to go to the market every weekend, either on Saturday or Sunday morning. Now, I go to the market twice a week. I buy all the vegetables and fruits, all the fish, half of the meat and cheese. I buy all the rest in supermarkets, except bread, which I buy in a bakery, or wine, which I buy at a local wine store.

Markets are very famous in France, as you find a wider variety of fruits or vegetable and at better quality. It's also a place where you can ask a lot of questions about how to cook the products and where they come from. On the other hand, I know some people who buy all their food in supermarkets because they find it easier to buy everything at the same place. It's a question of choice, but at least we still have the choice.

JF: The online magazine *Slate* recently published a critique of *French Women Don't Get Fat* that questioned a number of the book's assumptions, including the basic premise in its title. If obesity rates are rising in France, as cited in the article, does the French paradox apply only to a certain strata of French society? How do you respond to this point and the other arguments in this article?

ET: I think that the author of the article states some good points. I also have heard that obesity rates in France have been increasing over the past years. Besides, I would tend to agree that French women are as body-obsessed as American women: Slim-Fast and WeightWatchers exist in France too!

However, regardless of the "Americanization" of French eating habits, French eating culture is fundamentally different than the American one.

Regardless of their social background, the French cook more than the Americans. I would encourage anyone who is not convinced to just browse one grocery store in France and one in the U.S. The main difference is that the frozen sections in American grocery stores are much bigger than in France: The market for prepared food is simply not as big in France. Furthermore, TV dinners are a concept totally unknown to the French culture.

There is definitely a "bigger is better" culture in the U.S. Whether it's a car or a house, bigger is better. There is even a commercial for yogurt that claims

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that there is 30 percent or so more yogurt in their container than another leading brand's. Again, if you are not convinced, go to a French restaurant. Free refills? No way. Bringing a doggy-bag home? Simply unimaginable!

CD: First of all, let me note that I have not yet read the *FWDGF* book, so I am mainly reacting to what the Slate article says about it.

"The first problem with this picture is that it may already be out of date."

I completely agree with this statement: In particular, the daily shopping and the exclusive use of fresh and seasonal products sound very far from today's reality. It is a good thing to strive toward (although I can't quite see the point in daily food shopping, that's hardly convenient), but most people have little to no notion of what the right season is for anything they eat: You can pretty much find anything at any time of the year (in varying degrees of quality of course), and people use a lot of frozen/canned products, too.

I think most people simply go for what's convenient (to buy and to cook) and what they or their kids will like. Being choosy about your food and demanding the best is a luxury that not everyone can afford, in terms of money or time.

"The French accept a level of government paternalism that would not go over easily here."

Having lived in both the U.S. and in France, I think this is an exaggeration. This may have been true in the first half of the century (and one can hardly blame a government for trying to curb infant mortality) but nowadays what the ministry of health does is keep an eye on what the kids eat at school (which is obviously a good idea, and their natural field of action since these are public schools), issue dietary guidelines (not unlike the FDA's food pyramid), and organize campaigns to raise awareness about obesity and the need to exercise and eat properly. I am not one to take paternalism or patronization too well, and I sense no such thing here.

"They think of themselves as an old culture, skilled in the arts of irony, hypocrisy, and nuance."

I wouldn't put it that way. We do think of ourselves as an old culture (and rightfully so) and we have a tendency to think ourselves smarter than the rest of the world (a trait I personally find amusing more than annoying), but I don't think we pride ourselves on our hypocrisy!

"While many people think of eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia as an American problem, they are, as far as can be measured (and these statistics should always be taken with some degree of skepticism), equally prevalent in France."

As for eating disorders, it is a sad reality that is still very much a taboo, and I get the feeling that this is where our problem lies. When it comes to food and what one actually eats, the French display a complicated mix of pride and *pudeur* (a propensity to hide from others what belongs to one's intimacy, halfway between reserve and modesty): Most people would be very reluctant to admit that they have a problem with food and/or their weight lest it be considered as a sign of weakness or inadequacy, and

commercial for yogurt that claims that there is 30 percent or so more yogurt in their container than another leading brand's.

they would rather have everyone believe that they effortlessly maintain their weight while eating whatever they fancy. And this social pressure is bound to foster some unhealthy eating behaviors. Were we to speak more openly about these matters, it would certainly be easier for everyone to deal with them.

More than hypocrisy or a paradox, I think what we have is "the French dilemma": We love good food and good wine, we love the idea of a hedonistic life, of large meals with family and friends that go on happily for hours, but we have to work to reconcile this with our desire to look good and be healthy. And this does not necessarily require "the useful art of self-deception" (which I think sounds slightly neurotic) but rather what I would call bargains with oneself: "I will allow myself to enjoy this excellent meal, but tomorrow I will eat less and/or exercise more."

In my opinion, the main problem with the book is that it claims—once again—that someone (be it a doctor, a coach, or an entire country) has all the answers. Yes, there are a few things to be learned from the French, but I don't think it does anyone any good to pretend (rather condescendingly, I might add) that it is all easy and effortless.

PW: It's very difficult to say that we, French people, have the solution, as there is such a big difference in shopping behaviors among French people. This morning, as I was buying fish at my local market, the guy just before me told the stall-holder, "See you tomorrow," so there are some people who go to the market every day to buy fresh food while some people go to the supermarket once a week and buy everything they need for the week, even bread! I've noticed also that we have more and more ready-cooked food in supermarkets, frozen or not, which is quite successful, but some people never buy them.

Perhaps the only thing all French people have in common is that even if we don't have time or take time to cook every day, it's part of our culture to gather with family and friends from time to time to share a meal and enjoy eating and being together. I've got the feeling that with younger generations, this isn't something that is dying out.

JF: Recently, on her blog Chocolate & Zucchini, Clotilde could be seen pining away for an American-style brunch, complete with banana-nut muffins, and singing the glories of corn on the cob. If we Americans have a fascination with French gastronomy, I'm wondering if there is reverse phenomenon among the French? What's to love about American food and food culture? And do the French have anything to learn from us?

PW: Yes, American food can be very exotic for French people and we sometimes try to recreate some part of your culture but not always with success. Clotilde had a good point with brunches in France: They are not so good and very expensive. In the past 15 years, we adopted quite a lot of American food and they have become almost part of our culture, such as brownies, muffins, cheesecake, caesar salad, maple syrup, etc. Steak houses, and of course McDo [McDonald's], are very popular, too, in France. They were the first restaurants to welcome children, with toys and drawings. Five years ago, we began to have places in Paris where you could find bagels with cream cheese, but there are still few of them, which is a shame. I love bagels.

We could also learn a lot about service. The way American restaurants welcome customers and especially children, which means you can spend a relaxing time in a restaurant even with young children, which is not really the case in France.

ET: As long as they're a little open-minded, the French are definitely curious about American food. Brownies, muffins, and Oreo cookies have made their way to France, and people like it. What actually amazes me is that you can find Oreo cookies in a fancy department store in Paris (Galeries Lafayette) right next to the Mariages Freres tea corner (a 150-year-old French tea shop)!

Some of my friends have given peanut butter a try. Some liked it, some did not. Maple syrup over pancakes has also become popular—it is “so American.” When my French friends visited me, they discovered pumpkin butter, which they really liked. Another friend has a love story with Red Mountain Dew and Toll House cookie dough—she eats it raw—she’s the kind of girl who would wash her palate with Fanta after a foie-gras tasting! But I still think she’s an exception. The French have also had growing interest in cheesecakes, although Philadelphia cream cheese is hard to find in France.

Overall, I would say that Americans have more fun with their food than the French.

I have blogged twice about the diners in my neighborhood and both posts have received great feedback. Some said it was “like in the movies,” others were drooling over French toast... There is some kind of American myth overseas and anything like diners that matches it is seen with interest.

Overall, I would say that Americans have more fun with their food than the French. Americans don’t mind raspberry Jell-O being blue, whereas the French prefer subtle natural flavors over artificial flavorings and unnecessary icings. If the French could learn anything from Americans, that would be to have more fun with the food, while Americans could definitely be introduced to portion control.

RB: Honestly, I don’t really have a fascination for the American food even if I really like some products like the brownies or the muffins and the concept of “brunching.” I think in France the most popular American products are of course the burgers, like the McDo ones, but I won’t say French people are fascinated with that. It’s just a question of globalization: There are more and more McDos in France, so the burgers become the products we can easily find every where we go. I don’t know if French people really love this food. I have a lot of French friends in the U.S., and when I plan to visit them, they always ask me to bring them French products and especially chocolate. I discussed with friends who are back in France, and they were not able to tell me the American food they really miss...

Really, I don’t know what we can learn from the American people. Maybe thanks to them we know what we have to avoid in terms of food and eating habits. Talking about children’s obesity, the U.S. is always quoted as the example we mustn’t follow. Maybe we can learn from American people not to smoke in the restaurants and bars! That’s the thing I really, really appreciate in the U.S.! It’s not really about food or eating habits, but it’s linked.

CD: I can only speak for myself, but I happen to have a personal affection for many aspects of American food and food traditions. I like the fact that food is often celebrated in a purely joyful, almost childish way: simple food, simple tastes, and a certain unselfconscious and unpretentious way to enjoy food for what it is. But more importantly for me, a lot of these traditions (hot dogs at the ballpark, pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving, a big tub of popcorn at the movies, grilled burgers and corn on the cob barbecued in the back of the garden, with fresh beer from a keg and a platter of slice-and-bake chocolate-chip cookies) are an important part of my own personal imaginary America, the one I’ve built after years of watching movies and reading books that were set in the U.S. It doesn’t really exist anywhere (California matched for a few aspects only), it’s a mix of different times and places, but my way of cooking and eating, and my food culture in general, are definitely influenced by some of these things.