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# Economy, Gastronomy, and the Guilt of the Fancy Meal



*Sources of enjoyment may be accumulated and stored up; enjoyment itself cannot.*

—John Stuart Mill, “On the words productive and unproductive,” 1844<sup>1</sup>

MY MEAL AT THE FRENCH LAUNDRY lasted three hours, as measured from an initial cheese-scented brioche to a concluding chocolate dome with pistachio nougat. Nevertheless, it had the curious quality of seeming to begin only at the meal’s exhausted end, when the check arrived. It was the sheer size of the bill—\$1,200 for four, or \$300 apiece—that compelled me to reassess the meal in terms of its price. Flavors faded from memory and were quickly

replaced by dollar signs. Professional historians say that we write our chronicles of the past “proleptically” when we describe events in terms that anticipate other things yet to come, as though the past already contained the germ of the future. After the bill’s arrival, I felt a kind of gastronomic prolepsis come over me, and I struggled not to project the horror of the meal’s cost back onto each morsel, whose deliciousness I could, at that point, only grudgingly admit. While Thomas Keller, the owner and head chef of the French Laundry, deserves the high praise he receives, how could I help but feel guilty at the expense? There was my own wallet to think of, naturally, but there was also guilt over the many who go hungry each day. In the face of such

good reasons for guilt, I was fascinated to find myself insisting, to my friends and anyone who would listen, that the meal had been an entirely justifiable expense. Only a few hours after we finished eating, my meal went from being an immediate collection of tastes and sensations, which could never be worth \$300, to become a far more abstract thing called gastronomic experience, which somehow was worth the price of admission. And what about the people at the next table—those elegantly dressed people, those people who seemed to have shaken hands with the world? What had they, and I, bought with our money that evening?

There may be a few people in the world who can regularly enjoy such meals, but I am not one of them. As a graduate student I am used to counting my pennies: the average humanities student at my university lives on about \$15,000 a year, which in the pricey Bay Area is barely enough to scrape by in a shared apartment. My portion of our meal thus cost me two percent of the average graduate student's yearly stipend—perhaps less than a respectable drug habit, but even after nine courses, you still need to eat the next day. For reference, and only for reference, I note that I could buy about 337 packages of instant macaroni and cheese (89 cents apiece) for \$300 at Trader Joe's, or 16,854 of them for \$15,000. Let us just say, then, that my evening at the French Laundry was a moment of expense punctuating an equilibrium of cheap, everyday meals. I try to cook creatively, but my budget places some ingredients out of range, and a busy schedule keeps me from investing too much time in any one dish. Given the burden of financial caution I carry around with me, my meal at the French Laundry acted as a catalyst to further reflections, encouraging me to think hard about the way we pronounce meals "worthwhile" and about the calculations we make, consciously or unconsciously, about the price of pleasure, about the cash value we place on gastronomic experience.

Imagine it is 9:30 in the evening, on a busy city street. A couple steps out of a restaurant and they pronounce their meal "worth it," congratulating themselves on their wise choice of venue, for having followed the advice of a local restaurant critic, or for having chosen the right dishes from the menu. This scene, with its distinctly bourgeois flavor, is interesting precisely because it invokes the language of economics. While a very real financial choice (to eat in this particular restaurant, rather than at home, or at a competing establishment) has been made, the speaker is then applying that same type of logic—a calculating and reductive one—to the complex set of feelings that we can call our pleasure at table. That pleasure (or displeasure: imagine them saying, "that just wasn't worth it") is affected by so many

factors that the word "worth" seems faint and inadequate, like saying that the *Odyssey* is a long poem or that General Relativity takes a bit of work to understand. We can perhaps be forgiven for thinking in reductive economic terms about food—after all, there is a primary "exchange" of calories in dining that makes our sleeping, dining, and working lives possible—but the experience of eating truly excellent food seems poorly served by such logic. Given the myriad factors affecting whether a restaurant, a dish, or a glass of wine pleases us, to use the phrase "worth it," with its clipped tone and accompanying simplification of meanings, seems like an abdication of responsibility. It reflects a desire to avoid thinking hard about which flavors in the meal really pleased us, and thus about our likes and dislikes, those crucial constituent parts of our individuality. As in so many areas of life, a conventional turn of phrase is useful for brushing over the distinctions, and the ambiguities, that really matter.

At first blush, an expensive meal at an elite restaurant resembles other luxury goods like fancy cars, diamond bracelets, or designer suits. Such goods display price "elasticity," meaning that our willingness to pay for them changes drastically, following fluctuations in their price or the amount of cash we have on hand. Food of this type is inherently "unnecessary." It attempts to do something more for us than just provide calories. Its function shifts from the register of the economic to the register of the cultural, just as nice clothes flatter us in ways that surpass their function as covering and protection. Of course, none of us inhabits a purely economic universe, nor do we engage in the practice of exchange with solely utilitarian considerations in mind—otherwise, I might eat nothing but meals of lentils and rice, optimized for nutrition, forgo coffee, and drink only water, with lemonade thrown in to ward off scurvy. Each day, in subtle physical signs and explicit verbal messages, we "trade" with one another, forming our circles of association by acting in the market of Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural capital." In that market, the value of each sign or message is fluid, shifting as one's circles of association shift: my meal is potentially worth a great deal among my foodie friends and worth nothing among those who are indifferent to food or who pretend to be. The designer wristwatch, worth thousands in the right part of the world, becomes worthless on a desert island.

But my meal at the French Laundry can have a value in our "cultural economy" only if I can first convert a jumbled set of tastes, smells, and sights into a story, a narrative, and then have an opportunity to entertain friends and acquaintances with my tale. I may have enjoyed the meal while it was going on (and certainly the anticipation was worth its weight in gold!) but its lasting value is the value

of retrospection and ruminative experience. The chefs put their labor into the raw ingredients to create dishes; once having consumed those dishes, I put the labor of storytelling into their “ghosts,” performing an act of reanimation for my own benefit and the entertainment of others.

And yet, even after this labor of storytelling is done, there is still nothing to grasp. Despite what glossy magazine advertisements for vacations may imply, the signal paradox of experience is that while everyone “has” it, we can never truly possess it, no matter what we pay. While the advertisers entice us toward consumption, the poets (and therapists) remind us that time rearranges or even corrodes our memories of past adventures, and that, poor neurotics that we are, we may never truly feel “in the moment” of experience in the first place. Experience, then, places a certain pressure on the idea of *having*, of possession. But would I have avoided the French Laundry had I thought, before going, about the “futility” inherent in attempts to acquire experience? Perhaps such post-facto reflections are only for the guilty: my money should have gone to starving children, not for a fancy meal.

In order to examine why I came to see my meal as having been “worth the price,” it is necessary and, more importantly, pleasurable to talk about the food on the plate at the French Laundry. Keller’s meals consist of a *prix fixe* of seven or nine courses, each showcasing two or three ingredients and each designed either to present the essential flavor of each ingredient or to present the “play” of different flavors and textures. Each dish is presented (“served” is too plebeian a word) on a specially designed plate, given an introduction detailing its preparation and the provenance of its ingredients, and then eaten using specially crafted utensils. (If memory serves, our waiter fumbled these introductions by trying too hard. His statement “This menu represents our tasting menu” sounded robotically formal, earning a wry comment from one of my companions: “He has an unusual understanding of reference.”) The food was indeed amazing and almost deserving of the considerable hype that Thomas Keller receives.

The ingredients used in each dish were top notch and thus pricey. Oysters, caviar, organically and gently raised beef, local organic produce, and high-quality high-cacao chocolate do not come cheap. However, given the expense of the meal (\$175 *prix fixe* before *supplements*, gratuity, and wine), I would have bolted from my seat and throttled someone had I been served a simple bowl of peaches, however carefully chosen by a team of betoqued experts from barrels of organic fruit raised by honorable stewards of our agricultural land. Instead, each dish had the “finished”

quality of something that had required a considerable amount of care and effort. This was food someone had to sweat over, food that had the price of labor in it, and that tasted like gold. In the early nineteenth century the economist David Ricardo described the labor theory of value thusly: The value of a commodity is equal to the amount of labor that was expended in producing it. Ricardo was not only thinking about the amount of physical force exerted, say, to craft a horseshoe, but also about the labor already invested in the anvil, the hammer, and the forge, all crafted objects themselves. I like to think Ricardo would have smiled on the products of Keller’s kitchen, and I grinned myself when I saw the intricate designs, written in liquid chocolate and then hardened, on our dessert plates: I had indeed bought something for my money, the chance to bear witness to human skill.

But Keller is not naïve enough to assume that tastes, textures, and artistic plating alone can be worth his price of admission. There is a theatrics at his restaurants, a sense that everything has been choreographed, or that one is at the center of a pattern radiating outward from the dishes themselves to encompass the silver, the table linens, the lighting, the paint on the walls. The staff leaves nothing to chance: there is no danger that leftover vinegar on the salad fork will touch the quail on its pillow of polenta, or that the gratin of asparagus will have its balsamic purity endangered. At one point in our meal, a friend’s brioche toast (to spread the foie gras upon) had cooled while she told a story; unbidden, a waiter assessed the situation and *replaced* the toast with a hot slice. He actually had to do this twice (she was telling a long story) and while I remember this as one of the meal’s high comic moments, there was also something distinctly spooky about it.

All of this emphasis on order has drawn some criticism of Keller, over the years. For my part, I thought of the meal as a strange amalgamation of elements, delicious flavors presented with a formality that seemed almost fearful: if modern societies have confronted their fear of chaos and the unknown (natural disasters, burglaries, religious uprisings)—in a word, *risk*—with the institution of the insurance policy, Keller staves off randomness with starched linen, mother-of-pearl spoons, and portions that must have been doled out using precision kitchen scales. If any kitchen understands how to turn the production of specific flavors, specific culinary experiences, into a science, it must be Keller’s. Some critics of the restaurant have complained that the French Laundry creates near-fascist conditions for eating, but I am actually less worried about the dictatorial atmosphere created by insisting that food be consumed in

a particular way—by the insistence that the diner herself become a willing part of the choreography—than I am about the covert faith, expressed by all the pageantry and fine-tuning, that experience itself might be quantified and controlled. While the high prices charged at the French Laundry led me to think about the market for luxury goods, and our willingness to pay high prices for certain experiences, the style of cooking and service seemed to tell a different but intimately related story about the idea that one can control, quantify, and reduplicate gastronomic experiences, as opposed to the idea that every serving of a given dish should have the same flavors—an idea to which professional kitchens naturally subscribe.

In addition to the aforementioned controls in service, Keller has elaborated (and related in interviews) a theory of the relation between portion size and taste, which goes beyond the familiar view, held by all who choose the workbench over the assembly line, that quality comes before quantity. A great believer in the law of diminishing returns, Keller feels that enjoyment of a flavor declines after a few bites, as eating a great deal of something actually inhibits our ability to assess flavors. One reviewer of his meals was won over by Keller's corresponding tactic of serving small, intensely flavored portions: "Imagine one carrot having as much sweet, earthy and fresh characteristic as a pound of carrots or a spoonful of pea soup with the impact of a thousand peas."<sup>2</sup> Pleasure is not derived from pushing one's fork through some starchy, leafy, or deliciously stodgy dish, from the thought that "there's still some left," but rather from the flash of a recognized flavor, seeming instantaneously to travel from the periphery of sense to the center of one's being. Some lingering species memory of hunger prepares us to be comforted by large portions at the table; Keller, in harmony with the contemporary view that Americans overeat, asks us to forgo dumb comfort for adventure's sake. Thus, as though recreating a pivotal evolutionary moment, we move out from tree-sheltered caves and onto grassy plains in quest of experience.

But, of course, it was precisely my search for experience that I found thwarted, during my meal at the French Laundry. I can put my complaint most simply as follows: I admire the degree of control Keller's staff displays in the kitchen, but am deeply skeptical when it is extended to the dining room. Romantic individualist that I am, I would like to adjust the seasonings myself, to identify my own needs, rather than have servers anticipate my needs to the preemptive extent that Keller's waiters do. My own ideological orientation, my *chacun à son gout* belief that personal experience must somehow involve the expression of individual

taste and judgment, was part of the stumbling block. After becoming part of the meal's choreography, as the servers insisted, and while dining on delicacies so complex and well presented, I began to feel that the line between the spectacle and my own experience of the spectacle had been worn away and was quickly disappearing. As I noted earlier, we can never really own experience—and yet I, like everyone, am deeply reliant on the idea of having *my* experience, in this case *my* luxury meal.

And this was precisely why the French Laundry troubled me—I had gone to the French Laundry knowing that the price tag would be high. On reflection, I came to understand that I had gone there with the intention of freeing myself somewhat from the hard-nosed financial mindset I often bring to food, to place, at least for one shining evening, experience before cost. And I was troubled, during the meal, because my personal quest for experience was thwarted by the style of service, which denied me the feeling that my experience was, in fact, an *individual* and personal one. On yet more reflection, my guilt at the amount I had spent began to seem not entirely like a pure guilt, regret over the cost to me or at my failure to give money to the poor. Some of the guilt was displaced anger, at Keller and his establishment.

What I am looking for, in these meditations on economy and food, is perhaps something ludicrous: that we take a fundamentally economic activity, eating (calories in, in the form of bread; calories out, in the form of ditches dug), and refuse to let our thinking about it be quite so bound by the fetters of the economic logic that guide the remainder of our lives. The phrase "that was worth it" is problematic for me, not only because of the word *worth*, which I have been criticizing in this short essay, but also the "it." It holds something very real, for example the taste of a bluefish fillet, up to the standard of something only *relatively* real, let's say the value of fourteen dollars, and pretends that the latter rather than the former value is the "real" one, the fixed point against which "ineffables" (if indeed the taste of bluefish, or any marine creature, is ineffable) are to be measured.

So if my attempt to have my own experience was thwarted, what made my meal worth (a word I can only now use in high self-consciousness) its price tag? Perhaps I did buy myself a small advance in culinary education during my evening *Chez Keller*? My meal did not make me a better cook, or even a better judge of other meals, but it did tell me more about what flavors are possible under the sun. To return to the idea of cultural capital, perhaps talking about my meal with friends helped me to advance myself socially? Unlikely. Even if part of me had hoped to

impress friends with the experience, I later found that many of my friends had dined at the French Laundry before me. Instead of me dazzling them like a master storyteller with the strangeness of my experience or the grotesque amount I had been willing to spend—as I had hoped to do—we shared a nice chat about the décor, about what was interesting and what was missing on the menu, and even about the question preoccupying me, the question of whether or not the meal had been worth it. What ultimately made the meal worthwhile were these conversations themselves and the way the meal caused me to reassess the way I encounter food. Of course, these meditations and reassessments could never lead me to remove myself from either the real or the cultural economy of the gastronomic world. In fact, to rebel against that world by criticizing the French Laundry, and to do so in print, suggests a certain degree of complicity with the cultural economy I critique; it is Thomas Keller's fame that makes people take notice of criticisms of his

restaurant. It is perhaps appropriate to conclude this piece, written about the aftermath of a meal, with a “ruminative” reflection: even if I could not judge the meal itself, or the experience of the meal, to be worth \$300, I find the experience of that experience deeply satisfying, an irony “worth” its weight in gold. ☉

#### NOTES

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1. “On the Words Productive and Unproductive,” *Essays on Economics and Society: The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 284.

2. See Jay Rayner, “Is this Man Really the Best Chef in the World?” *The Observer*, 10 October 2004.