

Vu par...

TERROIR SEEING AND EATING

Inscribed in 2010 as part of humanity's intangible cultural heritage, is French gastronomy in danger of becoming an esoteric monument? As if responding to this question, several dozen students from the Gobelins School were sent to various regions of France, to take photographs that challenge a secular tradition anchored in the country's far regions - and we should rejoice. Was it risky to incite a face-off between the global, connected generation of today and a typically French archetype? Between urban youth and chefs from the country's most remote areas? Definitely.

There is nothing predictable about these photos. Fresh and interesting, they suggest an entirely new landscape. What immediately strikes one about them is that by comparison, the standard images of French gastronomy have gotten a bit dusty. No more recipe-card photos, still lifes fresh from the oven, conjuring the delicious aroma of mouth-watering gourmet platters! Seen time and time again in the past century, such traditional images have been unanimously rejected by a younger generation that finds them tacky, corny or, even worse, more flattering to the chef than to the photographer.

Paradoxically, these same young artists acknowledge that foodie-ism plays a prominent role in their lives. Their food obsession is played out on social media sites, especially on Instagram, where we are all invited to participate in our neighbors' meals; through intense mediatization (on television, in magazines and newspapers, in books...); and in the fast-growing demand for reservations at the hippest new restaurants...

But one must not confuse gastronomy itself with the image of gastronomy. While the former is doing well, the second is probably in serious need of a facelift. What better way to accomplish that than through motivated young photographers who know that much is expected of them (one does not preclude the other). First, some delaying tactics here and there, to avoid the subject. From the delicious art of being foodies, these young artists have kept only the art.

«Gastronomy should be taken with a grain of salt,» as one of them put it, perhaps speaking for everyone. And their approach is cautious. Excesses of the flesh, extravagant feasts, multi-course tasting menus and other gustatory indulgences give way to a fascination for decoration, a heightened aestheticism. Vegetables, preferably raw, hang like trophies or artworks, at times slightly frozen, like small saltwater fish, without a hint of decay; kitchens, gleaming with cleanliness, feel like laboratories, or factories where ingredients will be transformed; stylish, full-length portraits of chefs make little reference to the trivial occupation that made them famous; seafood, pastry or candies become fashion accessories for sophisticated young women in sexy poses; pink pralines, shaped like roses, fall gracefully into the mouths of other young women; fruits from the local terroir are miniaturized, redesigned, repackaged, mise en abîme, shaped into the material of contemporary art or into objects of luxury, desire or consumerism, shown in diptychs, juxtaposed with the landscape of their origin...

And all this in such a way that terroir becomes a playing field for games and experiments - at times regressive, often narcissistic, almost always funny and inventive. This generation thinks less in terms of feelings (social or individual) than in terms of image. Those who escape, through humor or (self)-derision, who venture outside the studio, discover what it is like to shoot outdoors with the uncertainty of natural light, then jump into the unknown before landing on the ground.... Sometimes their vision seems more familiar, like a vacuum-packed meal, influenced by a vague tendency towards anorexia. «We are the generation of eating disorders,» they confirm, adding, «We subverted the concept in a way that is meaningful to us.+ They are not fooled by clichés; they either debunk them («No Pastis, no Bandol rosé wine, no calisson cookies ... but an actual octopus, so animalistic!») or, conversely, exploit them, like another surprising series of fake postcards of women in traditional Breton costume, veritable «cons-taken in Burgundy, but transformed with a palette of earth tones, as if they were in Russia...

In the end, is gastronomy outdated? By inviting young photographers to make something modern out of tradition, to see a secular institution with fresh eyes, we are securing the legacy of a national treasure with newfound vigor.

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