

## LES AMIS D'ESCOFFIER AND THE POST-DEPRESSION LABOR MARKET FOR CHEFS DE CUISINE IN AMERICA

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### ABSTRACT

This essay uses a cultural studies approach to analyze the effort of the gourmet society *Les Amis d'Escoffier* to re-create the niche market for chefs' services in the waning years of the Great Depression. It examines the depressed labor market for chefs after 1912 as well as aspects of the chefs' culture that informed the unusual rules and rituals *Les Amis* used to educate wealthy men in gourmandise. It concludes that, regardless of how successful the society was in its original goal, culture as well as functional response shaped the chefs' remedy to their labor market problems.

On the evening of Monday, March 30, 1936, fifty New York City chefs and hospitality industry managers filed into the Waldorf Astoria's Janzen Suite to enjoy "a perfectly planned, superlatively prepared and faultlessly served dinner" and build "bonds of true good fellowship that arise from loyal friendship . . . [between] men who appreciate the better things that life has to offer." Waiters trained by the famous Oscar of the Waldorf served seven courses prepared by Chef Gabriel Lugot's kitchen brigade. Thus began *Les Amis d'Escoffier*.<sup>1</sup>

Within a year, these "Friends of Escoffier" reached their self-imposed limit of one hundred members and had a waiting list of five hundred names. Within two years, chapters arose in Boston, Chicago, St. Paul, St. Louis, Washington D.C., and New Orleans. Yet *Les Amis* was different from the other gourmet societies that sprang up in the waning years of the Depression. It was not a commercial venture that advanced the immediate interests of a particular merchant or dining establishment. Rather, the American Culinary Federation (ACF) created *Les Amis d'Escoffier* in response to the generation-long depression in the chefs' labor market in America. *Les Amis's* primary purposes were to re-create the niche market for chefs' services that had existed prior to World War I and to raise the status of chefs from that of servants to that of valued arbiters of good living and dining for those who had weathered the Depression with their fortunes intact.

This essay examines *Les Amis's* unique organizational features, the intentions of its founders, and its historic trajectory. In many ways *Les Amis d'Escoffier* was like a for-profit business, so it is amenable to study by the methods of business historians who concern themselves with the growth of economic organizations and study business activities as a humanity rather than a science. Traditional business history models, however, refined by Alfred Chandler and others from origins in the "functional-structural" sociology of Talcott Parsons and entrepreneur-as-hero schema of Joseph

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Schumpeter, cannot explain fully the structure, function, and operation of *Les Amis d'Escoffier*. The chefs' occupational culture deeply shaped the history of *Les Amis* and begs to be included in this analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth Lipartito provides a key to a deeper examination of organizations in his 1995 essay, "Culture and the Practice of Business History." He suggests that Chandlerian business history usually provides thin descriptions of organizations and analyzes their similarities based on the incomplete assumption that firms respond to stimuli in a rational, functional manner. Lipartito recommends incorporating methods and theories from cultural studies in order to yield "a new way of appreciating the relationship between a firm and its environment," especially technology and, more importantly for the case before us, the market.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than acting rationally—that is, in an objectively identifiable logical way—businesses, like people, filter and act upon reality through their organizational, ethnic, and national culture. Lipartito defines culture as "a system of values, ideas, and beliefs which constitute a mental apparatus for grasping reality," and business culture as "a set of limiting and organizing concepts that determine what is real or rational for management, the principles of which are often tacit or unconscious." Culture orders the world by signs, symbols, myths, and rituals through which people develop a variety of devices and worldviews that make action possible. For example, business histories assert that auto makers in the United States adopted the assembly line during the early twentieth century because of "business" assumptions about the market and technology. The tools of cultural studies alert us to view such assumptions as arising from a shared culture, contending that the assembly line also sprang from traditions inherent in American manufacturing practice. Like technology, the concept of the market as viewed through the lens of cultural studies changes from an entity to "a negotiation between producer and consumer to assign meaning to products" and services through "symbolic displays, power relations, and social practices."<sup>4</sup>

*Les Amis d'Escoffier* is a useful test of the impact of an organization's culture on its history because symbolic displays, power relations, and social practices were the formula by which it operated. Though the ACF inaugurated *Les Amis* in response to specific threats to the chefs' occupational future in America, its function and structure emerged from trends that went beyond responding to the immediate problem. Such trends were not responsible, however, for *Les Amis* beginning when it did. The ACF took advantage of an opportunity provided the intersection of three important events: the death in 1935 of the most famous chef in the western world, Georges Auguste Escoffier, the economic rebound of 1936-37, and ACF's decision to use a two-pronged culinary education program rather than unionization to achieve its ends. The ACF wanted to provide professional education for culinarians themselves while the role of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* was to educate a niche market, the well-to-do, in the art of consuming fine cuisine.

*Les Amis*'s quirky, very strict rules and regulations also make it a compelling case study. The rituals these rules enforced were blatant expressions of the culture of gourmandism, defined by the nineteenth-century gastronome Brillat-Savarin as "the impas-

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sioned, considered and habitual preference for whatever pleases the taste," and manifested in the worshipful respect for *haute cuisine* that chefs themselves felt and that they wanted to instill into potential customers. But before discussing the founding of *Les Amis* and the promulgation of such rules, it is well to consider the problems that compelled chefs to act at all.

Chefs de cuisine were not a large occupational group at any time in the history of the United States. The decennial census did not distinguish between them and cooks, but chefs had a high profile and were an important part of the food service industry in America's urban centers between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I. They enjoyed respect and a strong public and private labor market. The *nouveaux riche* plutocracy of the Gilded Age hired private chefs or patronized their dining rooms as a signifier of their own aristocratic pretensions. Society-conscious newspapers gave chefs publicity by following the public dining activities of the rich. This was the heroic age of the chefs' craft in America, when every boomtown compared its local restaurants to New York City's Delmonico's, the "Four Hundred" dominated New York's society, and the fashion was to keep a private "first class chef or cordon bleu."<sup>6</sup> After 1890, hotels became the leading edge of the food service industry in major cities across the country. There, chefs were the undisputed masters of giant kitchens that put out world-renowned cuisine. The work was hot and brutal, the tension palpable, and the hours excruciating, but there was camaraderie and, for a lucky and talented few, fortune, status, and fame. Famous chefs retired to prowl their dining rooms, meet and greet well-heeled patrons, cook table-side, and accept the adoration of the rich and famous. The demand for chefs was so great that journalists commented as early as 1892 on the critical shortage of skilled culinarians.<sup>7</sup>

This halcyon situation changed during the Progressive Era as food chemists, "New Nutritionists," dieticians, and home economists used the mantle of science, the problem of keeping underpaid domestic servants, and issues of social conformity to create a utilitarian canon of food that countered the plutocrats' *haute cuisine*. The reformers' purpose was to give the American middle class a distinctive dietetic identity that, according to historian Harvey Levenstein, was rooted in their failed efforts to alter the food habits of the immigrant working class. In return, these food reformers used the lexicon and symbols of "nutrition" and "the ration" to promote their own professionalization. Some reformers built the new culinary canon, while others attacked the old. Ellen Richards, veteran leader of the Domestic Science Movement, assaulted *haute cuisine* dishes as, "those inventions of some diabolical cook in past ages. . . [especially repugnant were] the rich gravies and sauces with which so many meats are served." Such food was not merely dangerous to individual health but also to civic America. Richards argued that although "it is the popular belief that brilliancy of mind or position is chiefly due to luxurious food, served with the disguises of the chef's art . . . Neither moralist nor sanitarian has begun to ask whether the increase of crime, of insanity, of . . . disease, of moral recklessness, is not attributable to the debilitating effects . . . of the fashionable table."<sup>8</sup>

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America's entry into the First World War encouraged such attacks by instilling a patriotic frugality in the nation's middle class and by strengthening the Progressive reaction against plutocratic consumption patterns. What had once been self-indulgence became gluttony, and many citizens considered displays of wealth and high living to be both silly and unpatriotic. Herbert Hoover's United States Food Administration gave government sanction to patriotic frugality, and the rhetoric of Americanization made it impossible to resist. The *Journal of Home Economics* carried articles entitled "The Patriotic Potato" and "Patriotism and Food," and dietary reformers sought Carnegie Foundation funds to organize and train teachers to Americanize immigrants through culinary re-education. They welcomed the advent of "American" cookery in public dining. One editorialist praised the Northern Pacific Railway's move away from French cuisine:

Most of us who have tasted both American and foreign cooking prefer our home dishes, when well prepared, to anything else for a steady diet. . . . Some to the best restaurants, dining-cars, cafes and cafeterias also specialize on [sic] "home" foods . . . the Northern Pacific Railway . . . has adopted "home" cookery in its dining-car service. A book of instructions for dining-car stewards and chefs . . . makes the following statement: ". . . our departure from French and French cookery, and the adoption of plain English designations, and the plain, home-like cookery have won the approval of our patrons. . . . you will strictly confine your menu-making to those things designated."<sup>9</sup>

How did chefs respond? The overwhelming majority at the time of World War I were foreign-born. They took almost no public stand against the reformers' onslaught, nor did they make any organized appeal for tolerance of their culinary canon. Many chefs were preoccupied with the war and left the United States for the trenches in northern France. Those who stayed behind often suffered because of the ultra-patriotism of the war-inflamed nativist trend in the Americanization movement. German-born chefs, for instance, suffered discrimination regardless of their loyalty to America, and all things European became suspect in the post-war Red Scare.<sup>10</sup>

Another attack on *haute cuisine* came from food processors. War needs of the government enhanced their position and legitimacy over that of chefs.<sup>11</sup> After the war, food processors actively courted the emerging consumer market, touting their products as more convenient to use than fresh ingredients and available without regard to season. Advertising wrapped processed foods in the aura of modern science and the authority of the medical community. Medical doctors took up the food chemists' idea of the "balanced diet" while manufacturers promoted their products as the way to get the foods recommended by the physicians. The director of foreign sales of the Royal Baking Powder Company wrote in 1928, "It is one thing for people to know what constitutes a well-balanced diet and quite another for them to . . . obtain the requisite supplies reasonably and at convenient locations." Scientific packaging made wide distri-

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bution possible; it “insures uniform quality, purity and standard measure,” all qualities of concern for the consuming public.<sup>12</sup>

Packaged fare, most of which relied on sugar and salt for preservation and to counteract flavor loss, spread into the public dining arena at the low-cost eateries that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. Cafeterias and luncheonettes relied on processed foods to keep down their overhead. This trend spread nationwide when Howard Johnson developed the commissary system to supply consistent and standardized foods to his franchised roadside restaurant chain and Duncan Hines, a travelling salesman, proselytized for quick service, cleanliness, and regularity over local flavor. Processed foods, identical menus, and eatery standardization spread what chefs considered a deadly uniformity—and a substitute market for their own skills—throughout the nation. To them, food was much more than a supply of chemicals the body needed to survive. It was the interaction of flavor and texture, the eye- and nose-appeal, and of seasonally-available high quality ingredients prepared well. Chefs advocated “regional cookery” with its sometimes-hearty-sometimes-subtle flavors, well-planned combinations of dishes, and reliance on fresh ingredients as a “reaction against Culinary Robotism. . . the struggle of honest stomach and discriminating palates against meat packers, vegetable preservers, soup murders, and jelly gibbons, a revolt against the can . . . against the morbid monotony of standardization.”<sup>13</sup> The queen of regional cookery was *La cuisine Française* which, wrote the editor of the ACF’s magazine, the *Culinary Review*, in 1936, “. . . cannot be commercialized by unskilled cooks.”<sup>14</sup>

The demographic change that occurred in America’s great cities after 1920 further challenged the chefs’ labor market and culinary canon. Giant corporations moved their headquarters to New York, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and other cities, bringing support businesses and bevvies of secretaries and clerks in their wake. These workers, mostly women from small towns who were educated in home economics and patriotic frugality, suddenly became the dominant dining market in most American cities. Unlike their immigrant working-class and *nouveaux riches* forebears, they ate an “American” menu of steak-and-potatoes in theme restaurants that depended upon glitzy interiors and modern music rather than classic cuisine to draw customers.<sup>15</sup>

Staggered by the combination of direct attack, enforced frugality, and a dramatic change in the dining market, the chefs’ occupation was laid low by Prohibition. The Volsted Act devastated fine dining in America. In 1923 cultural critic Elizabeth Robins Pennell wrote longingly of “those happy days, before the uplifter deprived us of our drink and the reformer fed us on pre-digested food,” and in 1931 food critic Julian Street wrote, “the art of noble dining . . . was assassinated under legal process on January 16, 1920, the day on which the prohibition laws became effective.”<sup>16</sup> Fine cuisine demanded wine as an accompaniment and ingredient. Street compared Lobster Newberg made without sherry to “a superior grade of wet newspaper,” but damaged preparation was not the biggest problem chefs faced during Prohibition. Well-to-do patrons of restaurant and hotel dining-rooms retreated to the comforts, and alcohol, of home. The rich continued to employ chefs and skilled cooks for awhile, but soon

began entertaining on a smaller scale. Many left the United States, and most of those who stayed in Manhattan gave their elegant Fifth Avenue mansions over to more profitable commercial uses. They moved into smaller apartments uptown where they found it difficult to hold large dinner parties or to country estates too distant from the city to attract large numbers of guests. Consequently the wealthy trimmed their culinary staffs by turning out their chefs' sous chefs and assistants. Whenever the chef required help, he hired temporary workers who were, as often as not, unskilled and untrained. The lack of trained help combined with a fad of household economizing to create a cycle of lowered culinary expectations. As standards fell, the wealthy realized they could survive without the help of highly-trained and well-paid chefs. Consequently, the once-thriving labor market for private chefs withered.<sup>17</sup>

The chefs' public labor market fared no better. Hotel and restaurant managers imposed new cost accounting regimens on kitchens to combat the effects of Prohibition on their profits. Haute cuisine was notoriously expensive to produce and, though its quality built many hotels' and restaurants' reputations, it was a loss leader. Left unsupported by the enormous profits of bar sales, kitchens had to become profit centers. Chefs rankled at the demands of their managers to lower costs or appeal to a lower quality but higher volume traffic. They despised economizing, for they considered cookery to be a fine art and most were untrained in cost accounting. One chef bemoaned his added duties at the ledger books writing, "a modern chef must keep one eye on his steaming pots and the other on a balance sheet, for the kitchen must now earn its percentage." Those chefs who could not accommodate themselves to the new cost accounting systems or who refused to produce scaled-down menus lost their jobs outright.<sup>18</sup>

Then came the Great Depression. In New York City, twenty-eight percent of the pre-1929 hotel food service workforce was unemployed by 1933. Almost half of the remaining employees worked on the "stagger" system in which two part-time workers shared one job. Wages for those who kept their jobs plummeted. An American Hotel Association survey of seventeen states in 1933 showed that food service wages fell by 25.7 percent. Higher wage employees suffered most. The pay of a second cook, for example, fell seven percent more than that of a table busser. For a fifty-nine hour workweek, fifty two weeks per year, the average second cook earned \$1,472.64. In New York, which was not the most expensive city in 1933, the cost of living for a family of four was \$1,225.21, leaving only \$4.75 per week to spare. Cost cutting schemes created by desperate managers, such as charging for traditionally complimentary uniforms and meals or changing the length of the pay period from weekly to monthly, cut into even those meager wages.<sup>19</sup>

Of course the nature of these threats to the chefs' employment market and culinary canon structured the ways they responded. Chandlerian analysis leads us to expect a rise in organization, attempts to control market share, and a consumer education campaign. Chefs responded in all three ways, but the structure of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* in particular cannot be explained thoroughly without analyzing the impact of the chefs'

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culture upon it. We can identify several features of the chefs' culture, shaped over the preceding 150 years, that directly shaped *Les Amis* and are responsible for its successes and failures.

The first characteristics are elitism and its corollary, hierarchy. Hiring the services of chefs had always been the privilege of the elite. It was a matter of economics that became a signifier of class and status, particularly in the post-bellum nineteenth century when using a male chef rather than a female cook signified the difference between patrician and middle-class families. Ward McAllister, New York's Gilded Age "Autocrat of the Drawing Room" and social arbiter for THE Mrs. William Astor, acknowledged queen of New York's Gilded Age upper crust, praised the economy and cleanliness of his own female Swedish cook, but considered his French chef to be both an artist and the *sine qua non* of his own place as a social leader.<sup>20</sup>

As servants to the elite, chefs adopted an elitist view of themselves. The kitchens were their domains where they enforced a hierarchy more rigid than that imposed by most kings on their own courts. Few cooks progressed beyond a workstation or two. Fewer still went beyond *chef de partie* status. Those who became *chefs de cuisine* were skilled and wily. Often, luck separated the up-and-coming chef from those who did not make it. Until the advent of culinary schools in the United States after World War II and the development of culinary apprenticeship programs by state and federal departments of labor in the 1970s, there was no credentialized path from cook to chef. Aspiring chefs relied on the skill and reputation of their mentors to give them status and employment; many apprentices and young journeymen paid handsome premiums to work under prominent chefs in Europe. The education of a cook in fine restaurants and hotel dining rooms was long, as well. One chef-author noted that "from vegetable boy to chef, in the kitchen of a Sherry or a Delmonico, is a journey of some twenty year's duration."<sup>21</sup>

Chefs adopted an individualism that bordered on egotism. They jealously guarded their domains from encroachment by managers or household masters and mistresses. They created art and "magic" which, to their minds, was unaccountable to anything but their professional ethics. Through fits of temper or pouting hypersensitivity, and by keeping their craft knowledge secret, chefs often controlled overly-managerial supervisors. Sometimes they demanded complete autonomy. Pascal Grand, chef at Sherry's in New York at the turn of the century related the story of a chef who resigned on the spot when a patron demanded that his banquet menu include a favorite dish that the chef considered inappropriate. The owner sided with the chef who, according to Grand, "possessed a very proper pride."<sup>22</sup>

This fetish for elitism, hierarchy, and individualism created a "star" system among chefs. They competed fiercely, if often fraternally, for recognition, fame, and status. Much of their competition was ritualized and controlled in culinary salons hosted by mutual benefit associations. But business was another matter. Chefs struggled to improve their cuisines in order to bring repeat customers and increase the business for their "houses" without regard to whether they were owners or employees. Indeed, it

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was in the arena of the dining room where reputations—the coin of the realm among chefs—were made.

The chef with the greatest reputation in the early twentieth century was Georges Auguste Escoffier, dubbed “The Chef of Kings, the King of Chefs” by Kaiser Wilhelm II for his elegant cuisine. Escoffier brought together many practices that were developing in an uncoordinated manner in the culinary world, thereby creating the canon of fine dining for the twentieth century. He codified *La cuisine Française* by making the recipes of Paris the standard, and his ideas about dining—that dinners were not affairs of state but intimate experiences for couples with “eyes only for each other,” that diners should leave the table full but not stuffed, and that a rapid change of courses imparted a rhythm and flow to a meal—fit with the mobility of the railway age.<sup>23</sup>

Escoffier consolidated nascent ideas about how fine cuisine should be manufactured in a way that also fit the age. He turned the kitchen into a modified assembly line divided into stations, where the various *chefs de partie* cooked individual parts of the meal that then were assembled rapidly. Over this he imposed a modern chain of command, with definite responsibilities for each function. Escoffier, more than any of his contemporaries, positioned himself to lead his occupation into the new century. He made a fortunate partnership with César Ritz, impresario of London’s chic Hotel Savoy, that influenced Europe’s *belle époque* hotel building boom. He edited the influential professional magazine, *L’art Culinaire*, and authored two well-timed cookbooks, *Le Guide Culinaire* and *Ma Cuisine*. Furthermore, he trained over two thousand apprentices, many of whom became disciples after moving to their own kitchens. Finally, Escoffier had the good fortune to live to be a vigorous 85. Contemporaries and successors venerated him by the time of his death in 1935. American chefs almost universally referred to the small, quiet Frenchman with the bushy gray mustache simply as “*Maître*.”<sup>24</sup>

The cultural baggage carried by chefs de cuisine into the twentieth century, coupled with the impact of Escoffier’s ideas about food and its production, produced a canon of cuisine and a worldview that distinguished modern culinarians from their predecessors, and from competitors, for domination of modern foodservice. Chefs developed strategies limited by their culture to reestablish control over the meaning and importance of their work to American society during the interwar years.

*Les Amis d’Escoffier* was only one of the strategic devices chefs used in their campaign to regain their employment market and social status. Chefs had organized mutual benefit societies in cities across the United States since the early years of the twentieth century. These local organizations provided insurance benefits and a professional meeting ground, but as the century progressed they also propagandized for the importance of chefs. New York, of course, had more such organizations than any other American city. New York chefs organized along ethnic or linguistic lines. The Swiss founded both the Geneva and Helvetia Societies, Germans ruled the International Cooks’ Association, Italians dominated the Chefs de Cuisine Association, and the French controlled the Vatel Club and the *Société Culinaire Philanthropique*. In 1929, the French



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and Italians cooperated to found an umbrella organization based on professionalism and mutual interest, the American Culinary Federation (ACF). Like Chicago's Chefs of Cuisine Society and San Francisco's Chefs Association of the Pacific Coast, the ACF tried to rationalize culinary education on the East Coast through an apprenticeship program and by dominating New York's Food Trades High School. It sought to organize chefs in eastern cities and to co-opt existing chefs' societies. To this end, and to promote the interests of chefs to the hospitality industry, the ACF inaugurated a trade magazine, *The Culinary Review*, in 1932.<sup>25</sup>

*Les Amis* itself was the brainchild of ACF General Secretary Joseph Donon who hoped the new gourmet society would educate a select group of powerful and prominent men to the "fine art of the table" and an "appreciation of good cuisine." *Les Amis* did this by holding formal dinners in the fall and spring of the year at locations which had a reputation for quality cuisine. In addition to reputation, the host institution had to employ chef-members of the American Culinary Federation, thereby signifying both that the house adhered to the Escoffier canon and that it recognized the culinary authority of ACF chefs.<sup>26</sup>

The society limited its membership to one hundred, all of whom were allowed to bring a guest to each dinner. Women had no place in *Les Amis*, though ACF President Charles Scotto tried to reserve one dinner per year for them. It was devoted to bringing back a public dining style that did not cater to women, for chefs did not seem to regard women as their potential market. *Les Amis* also excluded wine and food merchants from membership to reduce the chance of commercializing its meetings. Unlike women, merchants were allowed to attend dinners as guests. The by-laws reserved sixty percent of the seats for ACF members and forty percent for lay members. This ratio gave chefs the official leadership of the society and allowed them to dominate the dinners in their conception, execution, and, most important, reception by the non-chef members. Each member paid six dollars per meal (equivalent to \$70 in 1999), and the society took no donations of food or wine, nor did it spend more than it collected.<sup>27</sup>

The dinners themselves were highly regulated. The society's *Comité de la Bonne Bouche*, composed of Otto Gentsch, president of the ultraconservative *Société Culinnaire Philanthropique*, G. Selmer Fougner, food and wine columnist for the *New York Sun*, and two ad hoc members, accepted bids for each dinner. One observer noted that the *Comité* "goes about arranging the dinners with the formality of seconds arranging a duel." The chef submitted his menu and wine choices, and then prepared at least one rehearsal for the *Comité*. Even as well-respected a chef as Charles Scotto—Escoffier's favorite apprentice—had to stand for this test. Prior to hosting the March 1937 dinner at Hotel Pierre, adjacent to Central Park, he presented his dishes to Fougner, Gentsch, and Clayland Tilden Morgan, vice president of the National Broadcasting Company. Because the constitution specified that one dish must be an Escoffier classic, Scotto prepared the difficult *La Poularde Rose-en-Mai* which featured chaud-froid glazed chicken breasts garnished by tomato mousse. Gentsch, a rival of Scotto's within the ACF, took exception to the presentation. Thinking the centerpiece on the serving tray looked like

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a papier-mâché hen painted red, he abused the chef furiously: "Stupid man, you should know that Maitre Escoffier never would have approved of a garnishment that could not be eaten and enjoyed!" Scotto retorted patronizingly, "Idiot . . . that is the mousse. I have molded it in the shape of a chicken."<sup>28</sup>

Other constitutional regulations ritualized the dinners. They were held at night because "evening is favorable to digestion." Hors d'oeuvres and sherry preceded the meals, which the host served at exactly the prescribed hour. Late arrivals began with the course served at the time. No one under the influence of alcohol was allowed to enter. Furthermore, diners had to consume each of the wines presented during the course. Waiters removed all glasses at the end of each course, regardless of how much remained of their contents. No one smoked for, as the constitution said, "A person who smokes while eating does not deserve the title of 'gourmet.'"<sup>29</sup>

The constitution mandated silence with the arrival of each course, "for one cannot appreciate good food in the midst of uproarious noise," and prohibited speeches beyond those required to keep the organization running smoothly. Members or guests who spoke of personal affairs or tried to make business contacts faced expulsion. The rules also enjoined diners from discussing religion or politics, or even repeating over-used witticisms. Better to tell an uninteresting story than one so "hashed and re-hashed . . . it will no longer produce mirth." Finally, the constitution banned a guest of honor, a head table, or formal dress, but required each diner to wear his napkin tucked into his collar. In fact, *Les Amis's* motto was "la serviette au cou"—"tuck your bib in your collar."<sup>30</sup>

These rules performed a number of functions. Prohibitions on talking created a "worshipful atmosphere to which superlative food is entitled" and prevented speech-making or business dealings from taking precedence over the dinner.<sup>31</sup> Directions about drinking, smoking, and dining itself led members and guests to develop manners reminiscent of those of the early Gilded Age, before gourmandise fell to gluttony. The rules about formal dress, guests of honor, and head tables obscured the different social status of chef and lay members. The bib-tucked-into-the-collar performed the same function—blending the chefs and their social superiors—by providing a masculine uniform of sorts. *Les Amis* members adorned with their napkins had a "sacerdotal look."<sup>32</sup> The rules and dress code put the chefs on an equal footing with all other *Les Amis* members, whether they were hotel managers, food columnists, business executives, or local politicians.

*Les Amis* allowed chefs to climb into significantly higher social and economic circles than those they had inhabited since before World War I. They hobnobbed with the wealthy and powerful not as servants, but as equals and even superiors—teachers of gourmandism. After the society had held its first few dinners, demand for memberships expanded well past the one hundred member limit, putting chefs into the enviable position of having New York's elite waiting for their approval. But the rarified atmosphere of *Les Amis* was not a place open to all culinarians. It continued the tradition of the *Société Culinaire Philanthropique* and the Chefs de Cuisine Association that

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divided the culinarians into two groups: 1) an elite of highly-trained chefs recognized by their peers for their ability, and 2) all other cooks. In this way, chefs demonstrated that they had more in common with the lay members of *Les Amis* than they did with cooks who did not adhere to their culinary canon. Donon spoke of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* just after its first anniversary:

Those who appreciate good and well-prepared food, and they are many in this great land of ours, are now realizing that, overshadowing the so-called cooks, there are the true culinarians, men of professional achievement: intelligent, capable and reliable men-cuisiniers—to whom can be entrusted the very difficult and all-absorbing task of providing the properly cooked foods being served in our sumptuous dining rooms, as we may call most of our modern hotels and restaurants.<sup>33</sup>

*Les Amis* dinners also garnered for chefs and the ACF the publicity that they had sought. Trade magazines ran features about the society, Fougner covered every dinner in his *New York Sun* column, Lucius Beebe rhapsodized in his syndicated column about those he attended, and, in 1937, the *New Yorker* ran a long article about the preparation and presentation of the March dinner at the Hotel Pierre. A number of groups had sprung up to exploit the commercial possibilities of Escoffier's death by selling fancy dinners, but *Les Amis* used the power of its friends such as Oscar of the Waldorf, hotelier Lucius Boomer, columnists Fougner and Beebe, radio magnate Col. Edward Ware, and publisher J. O. Dahl to seize the high moral ground and drive them out of business. This left the exploitation of Escoffier's reputation open only to chefs who had actually been his associates and who currently belonged to the ACF.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to generalize at this time about the success of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* in increasing the market for chefs in the United States. Nevertheless, it did attract a great deal of interest for the first few years of its life. Selmer Fougner received more than one letter decrying the membership limit, and within its first year *Les Amis* received hundreds of applications from New Yorkers alone. Full membership and guest lists have not been uncovered, but *Les Amis* seems to have attracted not only a full contingent of chefs, hoteliers, and publicists, but also a good number of high-powered business and professional men. Clayland Tilden Morgan of NBC served on the *Comité de la Bonne Bouche* noted above, and attendees of the March 1937 dinner at the Hotel Pierre included artist Gilbert White, U.V. d'Annunzio, the poet's son, and former Postmaster General Walter F. Brown. Other members included Maurice Roux of the Non-Staining Cement Company, and Gordon Brown, sales manager of the Bakelite Corporation.

In addition, the society enjoyed a profound popularity among American Culinary Federation member organizations outside New York City. They established *Les Amis* societies throughout the eastern half of the United States. In fact, the appeal of the Escoffier dinners proved to be a significant tool for spreading the ACF itself. Chef Pierre Berard established the *Les Amis d'Escoffier* for the Chicago Chefs of Cuisine Association with a dinner for fifty at the Congress Hotel on December 7, 1936. Boston's

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Epicurean Club created its committee in March 1937, quickly enrolled more than its self-imposed fifty-member limit, and successfully hosted its first dinner at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on November 29. Berard, having moved from Chicago to St. Louis, created a *Les Amis* chapter there in November 1937; it hosted its first dinner at the Coronado Hotel's Club Caprice in January 1938. In the spring of 1938, chefs in New Orleans, St. Paul, and Washington D.C. established *Les Amis* chapters, thereby creating a national presence for the ACF that it had not previously enjoyed.<sup>35</sup>

The Second World War, internal ACF politics, and the remarkable changes in food service that the war accelerated stripped *Les Amis d'Escoffier* of its didactic function and turned it into just another gourmet club. Nineteen forty-three was the most oppressive year of World War II for Americans. Citizens had begun to feel the pinch of rationing, and the news from the fronts was not inspiring. In solidarity and for fear of being seen as wasteful, *Les Amis* voluntarily halted its dinners throughout the nation. The New York chapter held only one before the end of the war—to raise over one-million dollars for the Fifth War Bond Drive. When it resumed dinners in 1946 the fractious politics of the chefs' world overtook it. Within a decade, Joseph Donon, *Les Amis's* founder and the last of the private chefs for the old plutocratic families of the Gilded Age, incorporated all extant chapters in his own name, making them his property and running them according to his own wishes. By the time he died in 1967, *Les Amis* possessed a sufficiently mature infrastructure to continue functioning. Many chapters still exist today.

Finally, the hospitality industry changed so dramatically that chefs no longer had the option of reviving the dining style of the pre-World War I era. Food manufacturers, chain diners and hotels, mass feeding units, and small restaurants replaced the old luxury hotels as the industry's leading edge. The dining public became a mass consumption market until the end of the Cold War. By then, an entirely new breed of American-bred chefs, most often trained at culinary schools rather than through apprenticeships, entirely replaced the old guard of European immigrants. It is these chefs who, abandoning Escoffier's style but not his methods, lead the culinary world in the United States today.

Judging from its post-war history, *Les Amis d'Escoffier* was not particularly successful in gaining its initial ends—re-creating a niche market for chefs and their services, becoming the authority on fine food and dining in America, and raising the status of chefs to that of leading business people. But *Les Amis* does seem to have enjoyed some short-term gains. Certainly it tapped into a pent-up demand for gastronomic education on the part of a portion of the American upper class that chefs as a group were able to satisfy. Furthermore, by limiting the number of participants in any particular city, *Les Amis* enhanced the value of its membership.

Though its founders conceived of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* as a functional response to problems in the employment marketplace for chefs during the inter-war era, the chefs' culture that had developed throughout the nineteenth century determined how the organization functioned. *Les Amis's* didactic role—teaching its lay members how to act

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like gourmands—emerged directly from its chef-members' desire to exercise authority in their area of expertise and to enculturate individuals who would then become the niche market chefs craved. Dining with society's "shakers and movers" as equals fulfilled the chefs' collective need to climb socially. Electing hoteliers and journalists to membership elevated chefs to the level of their own employers as well as spread information about *Les Amis* to others of influence.

Other attributes of the chefs' culture contributed to *Les Amis'* style and success in a multitude of nuanced ways. Well-to-do *Amis* who had weathered the depression with their fortunes intact or who had actually prospered during the decade shared the chefs' elitism. A knowledge of fine cuisine, wines, and other accoutrements of the table enhanced the lay members' social standing. Silence before each dish signified a reverence for the dining experience while refraining from discussing business made members appear aristocratically unconcerned with seizing every opportunity to make profits.

The failure of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* to recover its pre-World War II verve also rests at the stoop of the chefs' culture. Petty rivalries and jealousies, the ugly aspects of the chefs' excessive individualism, embroiled *Les Amis* in the internal politics of the American Culinary Federation. Though healthy for the ACF, the political battles left *Les Amis* rudderless. Joseph Donon both rescued the organization and separated it from its original mission when he made the society his personal property in 1956. By 1972 the gulf between the ACF and *Les Amis* was so great that ACF president Jack Sullivan asked if there had ever been a connection between the two. No one could answer with certainty.<sup>36</sup>

Drawing a complete picture of the quirks, distinctive history, peculiar successes, and odd failures of *Les Amis d'Escoffier* is not possible using only the functional-structural analytical models that dominated business history until the 1990s. Lipartito's suggestion to explore the culture of the organization under consideration provides a method by which to explain *Les Amis* more thoroughly. By the same token, *Les Amis'* manifestation of the chefs' cultural peculiarities makes it a perfect foil for applying a cultural analysis to what is ultimately a business history enquiry.

### Notes

1. G. Selmer Fougner, "Les Amis d'Escoffier: Its Slogan, 'La Serviette au cou,'" *Culinary Review*, May 1936, 7; idem *Gourmet Dinners* (New York: M. Barrows and Company, 1941), 32.

2. Donald R. Stabile, "Introduction," in David O. Whitten and Bess Whitten, eds., *Extractives, Manufacturing, and Services: A Historiographical and Bibliographical Guide*, Handbook of American Business History, Volume 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 11; Mira Wilkins, "Introduction," in idem, *Manufacturing: A Historiographical and Bibliographical Guide*, Handbook of American Business History, Volume 1 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), 15-16.

3. Kenneth Lipartito, "Culture and the Practice of Business History," *Business and Economic History*, 24, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 2-5.

4. *Ibid.*, 9-10.

5. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, trans. by M.F.K. Fisher (San Francisco: The North Point Press, 1986), 148.

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6. Ward McAllister, *Society As I Have Found It* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890), 305.
7. P. Blouet, "Reminiscences of American Hotels," *The North American Review*, 152 (January 1892): 86-90; Rush C. Hawkins and William J. Fanning, "American Hotels of Today," *ibid.*, 157 (August 1893): 197-208.
8. Harvey A. Levenstein coined the term "New Nutritionists" in *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ellen H. Richards and John F. Norton, *The Cost of Food: A Study of Diets* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1917), 3, 80.
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10. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 207-212, 223-224.
11. The United States government, of course, bought thousands of tons of canned and processed foods for its troops during the war. Even after some processors cheated or sold tainted victuals, the government did not condemn the industry; it simply prosecuted the individual corporation. In contrast, the Chefs de Cuisine Association of New York volunteered to train military cooks. Its offer was never answered.
12. The annual value of all manufactured food products almost tripled between 1914 and 1919, slumped to 1921, then climbed by approximately 150 percent by 1929. See "Table 1: Summary for Group 1—Food and Kindred Products: 1914 to 1929," U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: Manufacturers: 1929*, volume 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 196; E. B. Filsinger, "Changing Food Habits Open New Fields for Manufacturers," *Executives Service Bulletin* 4, no. 11 (November 1928), reprint by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, pg. 2.
13. The Gastronomer, "Where Are Our Leaders?" *Culinary Review*, June 1933, 9, quoting H. Pearl Adam, *Kitchen Ranging* (New York: Johathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1929), 24.
14. Edouard Panhard, "La cuisine Française," *ibid.*, February 1936, 1.
15. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 187-88.
16. Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *A Guide for the Greedy, By a Greedy Woman* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1923), x; Julian Street, "What's the Matter With Food?" *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 21, 1931, 10.
17. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 184; Andrew Tully, *The Era of Elegance* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1947), 1.
18. Harrison Rhodes. "New York Restaurants." *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, November 1, 1913, 15; Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife And The Transformation Of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 238-45, 252-89; Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 184; Street, "What's the Matter with Food?" 92, 94, 96.
19. In 1999 dollars, \$4.75 is equivalent to \$56.42. See S. Morgan Friedman, "The Inflation Calculator" website, <http://www.westegg.com/inflation>. Accessed March 27, 2000. Thelma Liesner, *Economic Statistics, 1900-1983* (New York: Facts on File Publishers, 1985), 44, 56; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 1-2; William Green Testimony, *Hearing on the Code of Fair Practice and Competition Presented by Hotel Business Industry, September 25, 1933*, 3 volumes, RG 9, Box 233, Entry 44, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C., volume 1: 45-46; Statement of Lester M. Rosenbloom, Representing the Central Committee, *ibid.*, vol. 3: 365; Letter from firm of Harris, Kerr, Foster & Co. to the American Hotel Association, September 20, 1933, *ibid.*, vol. 3: 609-10; Exhibit B, William Green Testimony, *ibid.*, vol. 1: 60-61.; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 90.

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20. Anne Willan, *Great Cooks and Their Recipes* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1977); McAllister, *Society As I Have Found It*, 170, 221-236, 305-319.
21. Pascal Grand, "A Chef and His Development," *Munsey's Magazine*, February 1902: 637.
22. *Ibid.*, 637.
23. Antonin Careme, chef to Talleyrand and George IV, created the canon of *grande cuisine* for the nineteenth century. He considered cookery to be a branch of architecture. See "Carême," *Larousse Gastronomique*, first American edition, ed. Prosper Montagné (New York: Crown Publishers, 1961), 211-214. Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 156-157, 159-163, 167, 212; Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28-29; Georges Auguste Escoffier, *Guide to Modern Cookery* (London: W. Heinemann, 1909), v-vi; Eugene Herbodeau and Paul Thalamas, *Georges Auguste Escoffier* (London: The Practical Press, Ltd., 1955), 79-80; Willan, *Great Cooks and Their Recipes*, 186.
24. Marjory Bartlett Sanger, *Escoffier, Master Chef* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1976), 154; Timothy Shaw, *The World of Escoffier* (New York: The Vendome Press, 1994), 9.
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30. "Constitution and By-Laws," 8-9
31. Alexander, "La Serviette au Cou," 46.
32. *Ibid.*, 46.
33. ACF Minutes, *Culinary Review*, June 1937, 17.
34. "Imitation is the Most Sincere Form of Flattery," *Culinary Review*, December 1936, 8; ACF Minutes, *ibid.*, May 1937, 15-17.
35. G. Selmer Fougner, "Of Trailers Who Would Like to Attend a Dinner of 'The Friends of Escoffier,'" *Culinary Review*, December 1936, 8-9; "Chicago Chapter of 'Les Amis d'Escoffier,'" *ibid.*, January 1937, 9; "Les Amis d'Escoffier: Boston Chapter Established," *ibid.*, September 1937, 9; ACF Minutes, *ibid.*, November 1937, 36; "Les Amis d'Escoffier: St. Louis Chapter," *ibid.*, February 1938, 9, 20; "Les Amis d'Escoffier: Washington, D.C. Chapter Established [and] Twin Cities Chapter," *ibid.*, April 1938, 12.
36. Minutes of the Annual Meeting, 1972, in ACF Historical Collection.

