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Chefs who have too many stars in their eyes

This lively attack on Michelin-starred French restaurants fails to address a deeper malaise in the nation's food culture, writes Jay Rayner

Jay Rayner

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Michael Steinberger is a greedy man. He is also a sentimental man. In this enjoyable account of the woes that have befallen gastronomy, those two vital qualities are locked in mortal combat with another ambition: to produce a serious work about a subject that some might consider ephemeral. For Steinberger, it is anything but, because if French cuisine dies, so, too, is a part of him extinguished. His sense of himself as an urbane, cosmopolitan man is intrinsically bound up with his memories of eating well in France: the luscious praline millefeuilles from Ladurée in Paris; the simple pleasures of the perfect croissant with coffee to start the day; the less simple pleasures of the outrageous foie gras dish served at Au Crocodile, a Michelin three-star restaurant in Strasbourg, that so delighted him he was happy to let the chef hit on his wife.

Au Revoir to All That: The Rise and Fall of French Cuisine

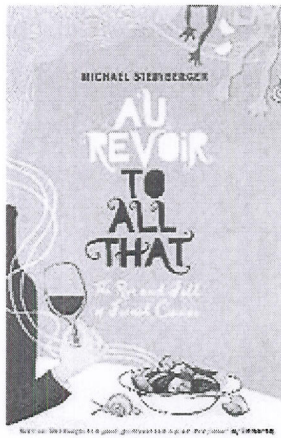
by Michael Steinberger

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His argument that the decline of French food culture - the withering of the small town bistro, the crisis of creativity at the very top of the market, the apparently unstoppable rise of McDonald's - mirrors a decline in the standing of France as a whole is convincingly made. A series of postwar social contracts has removed business incentives, penalised employers and made not working hard increasingly attractive; these have eaten away at the mechanisms that made indulgence at the table not just acceptable but the bedrock of the nation's life.

Steinberger is at his best at the place he is the happiest: writing about the trials and tribulations of France's Michelin three-star restaurants. A true trencherman, he revels in the pomp and the circumstance, the endless massaging by waiters and the edible fripperies which are celebrated as ends in themselves. He is spot on when he nails chef Paul Bocuse, held up as the elder statesman of French gastronomy, as hardly the revolutionary he claims to be, but merely a rapier-sharp hack who hides his corporate suit beneath his chef's whites.

But there are contradictions. On the one hand, he lashes out at French economic policy, allowing it to be labelled "communist" by various of his interviewees, yet he also bemoans the rise of the chef d'entreprise, those like Alain Ducasse who have moved away from the stove to concentrate on business. It is true that some have created restaurants which serve up an experience akin to being gently mugged for three hours. But others - Joël Robuchon and Pierre Gagnaire, for example - have created chains of brilliant restaurants.

While Steinberger is good at puncturing the deluded sentimentality of the French culinary classes, who are convinced their woes are down to attacks by US-powered big business and the philistinism of foreigners, his own sentimentality leads him to celebrate the mythical artisan. He makes much of the fact that Spanish chefs like Ferran

Adrià of El Bulli and Jean-Marie Arzak are now regarded as the culinary vanguard. But they are just as good at the business of branding, diversification and diffusion ranges.

The problem is that the gilded end of the food business in France tells only a part of the story. In France, food culture is a bottom-up affair, the gastro palace only its ultimate expression, and Steinberger doesn't quite have the appetite to deal with what lies beneath. There is much on McDonald's and the near death of genuine Camembert. But on the nitty gritty of what is happening to the bistros, the reliable restaurants in small towns in the middle of nowhere upon which the country's reputation was truly based, there is little. That's unfortunate because, while the death throes of the €500 dinner are endlessly entertaining, it is the demise of the quality €15 lunch that is the real story.

- Jay Rayner is the author of *The Man Who Ate the World* (Headline Review)