CHAPTER ONE

AMERICA’S DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOOD FOOD
Hogs are in the highest perfection, from two and a half to four years old, and make the best bacon, when they do not weigh more than one hundred and fifty or sixty at farthest: They should be fed with corn, six weeks, at least, before they are killed . . .

—prepping instructions for curing bacon,
*The Virginia House-wife*, Mary Randolph, 1824

SPAM, SPAM, SPAM, SPAM / Hormel’s new miracle meat in a can / Tastes fine, saves time / If you want something grand / Ask for SPAM!

—radio jingle for Spam, sung to the tune of “My Bonnie,” 1937

“IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS BEARD,” JULIA CHILD FAMOUSLY SAID, IN A CHARACTERISTIC display of generosity. But precisely what Beard began bears some explaining. Though she’s among the foremost of Beard’s protégés, the cookbook author Barbara Kafka can’t contain her exasperation at the received wisdom that there were no good meals to be had in America until her mentor reared his enormous head. “It’s like there was no food in this fucking city, or this country, until this miraculous apparition came along!” she says. “Or there was no cooking at home until Julia. Don’t tell me this kind of nonsense! I think that Le Chambord,* which I went to as a child, was

*The Café Chambord, as it was properly known, was on Third Avenue near Fiftieth Street in Manhattan, and was a popular celebrity haunt in the 1940s and 1950s. Jackie Gleason and his Honeymooners cast dined there regularly after their live Saturday-night telecasts.

PAGE 11: John Harvey Kellogg, cereal pioneer and renowned quack, presides over his health sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, 1937.
probably the best French restaurant that New York has ever seen and will ever see. And in the West Forties, way over, there were bistros lined up and down. Guys got off the ships right opposite the biggest harbor, practically, in the world—off the *Normandie* and the *Ile de France*. And they were French guys."

So, yes, it is wrongheaded to presume that Americans did not eat well until the Big Three became big. The very first American cookbook, *American Cookery*, written by a Connecticut woman named Amelia Simmons and published in 1796,* demonstrates that there were both cooks and eaters in those days who appreciated fine ingredients and flavorful food. *American Cookery* is considered the “first” American cookbook because, though several cookbooks had been published before it in the colonies and the young republic, they were adaptations or reprints of European cookbooks, mostly British. Simmons’s book, on the other hand, was expressly aimed at born-and-bred Americans who used ingredients not available in Europe, such as the “pompkins” she used in a “pudding” recipe that differed very little from our current ones for Thanksgiving pumpkin pie. Her “Indian Slapjack,” a cornmeal pancake of the sort now found on the menus of upscale Santa Fe bruncheries, would have gone very nicely with her “Beft bacon” (printers had not yet sorted out their use of f’s and ornamental s’s), which, in a manner that would excite today’s aficionados of artisanal foodstuffs, was cured in molasses, sea salt, and saltpeter for six to eight weeks and then smoked over corncobs.

Further evidence of a culinarily attuned America comes in the most celebrated cookbook of the nineteenth century, *The Virginia House-wife*, by Mary Randolph, a pillar of late-eighteenth-century Richmond society (her brother was married to Thomas Jefferson’s daughter), who, after her husband experienced some reversals of fortune, ran a boardinghouse and collected her
recipes into a book, published in 1824. Not only was The Virginia House-wife a work of astonishing breadth and worldliness—Mrs. Randolph knew how to cook everything from the expected Ye Olde dishes like roast goose and Indian-meal pudding to seemingly very contemporary offerings like polenta and ropa vieja (Cuban- or Spanish-style shredded beef)—but her respectful use of vegetables was downright Alice Waters–ish. Randolph cautioned against overcooking asparagus, and advised that a perfect salad should have “lettuce, pepper grass, chervil, cress &c.,” which “should be gathered early in the morning, nicely picked,” and served with a lovely tarragon vinaigrette.

President Jefferson was himself quite the epicure and procurer of exotic foodstuffs, importing seeds from Europe to plant in his garden and cultivating Mediterranean fig, olive, and almond trees at Monticello. In his personal “Garden Book,” he kept records of what produce was available at Washington’s vegetable market during the years of his presidency, 1801 to 1809, and the sheer variety sounds much like what a latter-day foodie might gush over at San Francisco’s Ferry Plaza Farmers Market on a bountiful summer day: sorrel, broccoli, strawberries, peas, salsify, raspberries, Windsor beans, currants, endive, parsnips, tomatoes, melons, cresses.

All this said, not for nothing is the United States known as a meat-and-potatoes kind of place. In the early years of the republic, it wasn’t uncommon for Americans to have beefsteak not only for dinner, which was consumed at midday, but for breakfast—a habit only exacerbated as the country expanded westward, opening more land for ranching. Foreign visitors to the United States in the nineteenth century routinely expressed their shock at the huge, meaty smorgasbords set out on groaning boards in the public rooms of hotels at all hours of the day, not to mention the joyless, gluttonous dispatch with which the natives went about the business of eating. Charles Dickens declared that Americans ate “piles of indigestible matter.” Thomas Hamilton, another Englishman, wrote an account of his journey to the United States in 1833 called Men and Manners in America, in which he observed, “In my neighborhood there was no conversation. Each individual seemed to pitchfork his food down his gullet, without the smallest
attention to the wants of his neighbor.” The food in these places wasn’t of high quality, either, with vegetables boiled to a fare-thee-well and starchy potatoes and puddings served in great quantities. The Canadian historian Harvey Levenstein, in a droll study of early-American dietary habits called *Revolution at the Table*, notes that “the enormous amounts of meat and starch and the short shrift given to fresh fruits and vegetables made constipation the national curse of the first four or five decades of the nineteenth century in America.”

It’s hard to square this bleak picture with the Edenic one painted by Mary Randolph and Thomas Jefferson, and, indeed, the feisty old culinary historian Karen Hess, who edited and wrote the introduction to the facsimile of the first edition of *The Virginia House-wive*, dismisses the work of Levenstein, her rival, as that of a “stupid idiot.” (As she points out, the Randolph cookbook alone presents clear evidence to refute Levenstein’s assertion that in the nineteenth century “herbs were used mainly for medicinal rather than culinary purposes” in America.) Still, it’s possible for an unbiased observer to use Hess’s and Levenstein’s works complementarily and draw the conclusion that while the United States had some terrific cooks, cornucopian markets, and an abundance of wonderful homespun culinary traditions, it also had some serious food issues. The novelist James Fenimore Cooper, author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, spent several years in France as a U.S. consul, living in Lyons, the nation’s gastronomic capital. Upon his return home in 1833, he recorded his horror at the state of American food, calling his fellow Americans “the grossest feeders of any civilized nation ever known,” a culinarily clueless people who subsisted on a diet of “heavy, coarse, and indigestible” fare. The chasm between French and American food was all the more appalling to Cooper because he grew up wealthy in the woodsy hinterlands of upstate New York, where all manner of wild game roamed and edible plants grew, and knew that his country could do better.

But the United States, a country wary of elitism and susceptible to populist, xenophobic demagogues, would always have mixed feelings about taking culinary cues from the French. Long before the age of “freedom fries”
and the efforts by an adviser to George W. Bush to damage John Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign by saying the Massachusetts senator “looks French,” the advisers to the Whig presidential candidate of 1840, William Henry Harrison, tried to smear the Democratic incumbent, Martin Van Buren, as a fey monarchist aristocrat—on the evidence that he drank champagne and had hired a Frenchman to be White House chef. The scrappy old soldier Harrison, on the other hand, subsisted on “hard cider” and “raw beef and salt,” and won the election.*

Whether it was a matter of this country’s Puritan origins, its early inheritance of British culinary stodginess, or just a general don’t-tread-on-me stubbornness, America would always have a dysfunctional relationship with the idea of culinary sophistication. A strain of the Harrison campaign’s plainspoken beefy populism persists to this day: in 2004, the CEO of the fast-food chain Hardee’s, Andrew Puzder, touted the company’s Monster Thickburger—a 1,420-calorie sandwich composed of two one-third-pound beef patties, three slices of cheese, and four strips of bacon on a buttered, mayonnaise-spread bun—as “not a burger for tree-huggers.” (Many of whom, presumably, look French.) Similarly, the thickset founder of the Wendy’s chain, Dave Thomas, did a commercial in the nineties in which he addressed a grateful roomful of 300-pounders who called themselves the “Big Eaters Club.” In another spot, Thomas portrayed himself as being trapped at a pretentious cocktail party where a mincing waiter offered him a dainty, absurd-looking hors d’oeuvre and said, “Crab puff, sir?” Cut to a shot of a relieved Dave back at Wendy’s, sinking his teeth into an enormo-burger.†

On the other end of the spectrum were those who shied away from fancy feeding for ascetic or religious reasons. Many preachers, such as the Presbyterian minister Sylvester Graham (1795–1851), inventor of the graham cracker, inveighed against spicy and heavily seasoned foods because of their

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*And promptly died of pneumonia, having served just thirty-two days in office.

†Thomas had quadruple-bypass surgery in 1996 and died of liver cancer in 2002.
supposed aphrodisiacal qualities. (Despite this, Graham was later embraced as a hero by sex-mad 1960s hippies for his advocacy of vegetarianism and early opposition to refined white flour, which, he sensibly argued, had less flavor and nutritional value than whole wheat flour.) Even when the robber barons of the Gilded Age did embrace the sophistication of French cuisine in all its glory, hiring French chefs for their New York mansions and Newport cottages, they were countered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by quack food faddists who were suspicious of pleasurable eating. Among the most famous was Horace Fletcher (1849–1919), a retired businessman with no scientific background who developed a huge following by advocating that all food be “thoroughly masticated”—chewed and chewed and chewed until it became flavorless and involuntarily shushed its way down the esophagus, thereby aiding the digestive system. (In fact, the probable health benefit from Fletcherizing, as this chewing process came to be known, was that it took so long that it made overeaters eat less than they would have otherwise.)

Marginally more credible was Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852–1943), who, in addition to developing a breakfast-cereal empire with his brother, Will, ran a “health resort” in Battle Creek, Michigan. Though he later rescinded his 1902 endorsement of Fletcherizing, Kellogg had his own peculiar thoughts on food, arguing that eating meat encouraged masturbation (a bad thing) and urging his guests to take yogurt enemas, the concept being that the active cultures in the yogurt would provide healing benefits to bowel walls aggravated by a lifetime’s worth of steak-eating and boozing.*

In a sense, the home economists and food-company executives who held sway over the women’s pages at the time of Beard’s move to New York were quacks in their own right. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, and as the United States grew more industrialized and urbanized, the sensualism and agrarian seasonality of home cooking gave way to the rise of processed foods and rigorous, supposedly scientific methodologies in the

*Kellogg’s quackery was later the subject of a novel by T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Road to Wellville*. 
kitchen.* Even Fannie Merritt Farmer, whose 1896 *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* is still considered a lodestar of honest American home cookery (and was renamed for her in subsequent editions), was a humorless home-ec lady, inordinately obsessed with couching her instructions in laboratory-speak. The first edition of *The 1896 Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* kicked off with, “Food is anything that nourishes the body. Thirteen elements enter into the composition of the body: oxygen, 62⅔%; carbon, 21⅓%; hydrogen, 10%; nitrogen, 3%; calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sulphur, chlorine, sodium, magnesium, iron, and fluorine the remaining 3%”—not exactly a mouthwatering lead-in. Farmer also expressed her hope that the day would come when “mankind will eat to live,” the implication clear that doing the opposite—living to eat—was reprehensible. On and on she went in this dour, lab-coated way, defining ingredients in terms of chemical compounds—for example, sugar as “C\text{12}H_{22}O_{11}”—and describing buttermilk, rather disquietingly, as “liquid remaining after butter ‘has come.’ ”

While Farmer, at least, was well-intentioned in her commitment to nutritionally correct (if not particularly palatable) food, the new wave of big food companies cynically used pseudoscientific claims of healthfulness to appeal to customers. General Mills, the food conglomerate responsible for the creation of the fictional homemaker-sage Betty Crocker, launched an offensive to proclaim the “wholesomeness” of white flour and white bread, even though the very advances in industrialized milling that made white flour possible were the ones that removed the germ and the bran from a wheat kernel—and therefore, most of the nutrition. C. W. Post, the main competitor of the bowel-obsessed Kellogg brothers, plugged his first ready-to-eat breakfast cereal, which he called Grape-Nuts, as “brain food”; taking his chutzpah a step further, he intimated that Grape-Nuts were also effective in fighting malaria and consumption. After chemists in the 1910s and 1920s dis-

*The founder of the home economics discipline, also known as “domestic science,” was a chemist named Ellen Richards, who in 1873 was the first woman ever to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*
covered vitamins—naturally occurring nutrients in foods that aid in metabolic processes—Post’s company seized upon the opportunity to play up the cereal’s calcium and phosphorous content in magazine ads that portentously asked readers, “Are you bringing up your children properly?” Even the Schlitz brewing company got in on the “health” act, boasting, oddly, that its beer was so pure that “when your physician prescribes beer, it is always Schlitz beer.”

James Beard had no time for factory foods, health fads, or pseudoscience. Well before he became a professional food person, he was reveling in the pure, the regional, and the homemade, even as his country’s cuisine, if it could even be called that, became ever-more processed and standardized. His unbridled enthusiasm, his pure love of taste, was so infectious that he could excite people even when he was describing eating experiences that, frankly, sound repellent. In his 1964 memoir, Delights and Prejudices, he documents his earliest “taste memory”—a phrase he is credited with coining—as he recalls being bedridden with malaria at age three. His family’s male Chinese cook, Jue-Let, who worked in tandem with his mother, Mary, in the kitchen, spoon-fed him a cure of chicken jelly: chicken broth with the white of an egg and its shell mixed in, then strained, then chilled into quivering blobs. To Beard, this icky stuff was “superb . . . magically good,” and “the true essence of chicken . . . [with] a texture that was incredibly delightful.” Likewise, the slightly older Beard reveled in shopping with Mother in a fine-poultry shop where “I would come away with two pounds of gizzards and hearts for myself.” Few people today would ever want to eat chicken jelly or chicken hearts—or, for that matter, the raw onions that Beard so adored—but fewer still could remain impervious to the sensual joy he took in eating these things, or to his conclusion that “the flavor of perfectly prepared chicken [has] remained a stimulant to my palate ever since.”

The dinners he prepared for his bohemian friends in New York in the 1930s were every bit as sensual and always made from scratch, with none of the canned foods or “ready mixes” such as Bisquick (which General Foods had introduced in 1931) that were proliferating on grocery shelves. Even if Beard was just making a poor man’s repast of mushrooms on toast—a
favorite snack of his—he bought his mushrooms fresh from an Italian corner
grocer and used good bakery bread. Earlier still, while knocking around the
Portland, Oregon, theater community in his twenties, he cooked unpreten-
tious backstage meals for appreciative casts and crews with ingredients he’d
procured from the city’s open-air farmers’ market on Yamhill Street, where
he and his mother shopped when he was a boy. The Yamhill Market was cru-
cial in shaping his culinary sensibility, as were the meals he and his family ate
outdoors in Gearhart, the coastal Oregon resort town where the Beards kept
a modest summer cottage. Right on the beach, Mary Beard boiled crabs and
grilled razor clams that she and Jim had caught and dug themselves; Beard
also picked the strawberries and the huckleberries that appeared in the pies
and tarts the family and their guests ate for dessert.

So by the time Beard finally recognized that cookery was his vocation as
much as it was his avocation—the success of Hors d’Oeuvre, Inc. led to a
contract for his first book, *Hors d’Oeuvre and Canapés*, in 1940—he realized
that part of his mission was to defend the pleasures of real cooking and fresh
ingredients against the assault of the Jell-O-mold people and the domestic sci-
entists. His second cookbook, published in 1941, was called *Cook It Outdoors*,
and while it didn’t have an exhortatory exclamation point at the end of its
title like the one at the end of *Awake and Sing!*, the social-realist play written
by the leftist playwright Clifford Odets six years earlier,* it might as well have.

By the time of his fourth cookbook, and his first attempt at a comprehensive
masterwork, the 1,217-recipe *The Fireside Cook Book: A Complete Guide to
Fine Cooking for Beginner and Expert* (1949), Beard was pointedly telling *The
New York Times* that what he’d written was no “laboratory manual.”

The opportunity to write *Hors d’Oeuvre and Canapés* arose through the
good graces of a social butterfly named Jeanne Owen, the secretary and day-
to-day manager of the International Wine and Food Society chapter that

*Odets’s producer, Cheryl Crawford, was among the wealthier members of Beard’s bohemian cir-
cle, and frequently had the cash-poor Beard out to her estate in Connecticut. She also used her
connections to get him his first paid catering job in New York City, before Hors d’Oeuvre, Inc.
operated out of Crosby Gaige’s office. The American-born but Paris-raised Owen saw promise in Beard and took him under her wing, educating him about French cookery and securing him the book contract. The book, however, was the undoing of Beard’s partnership with Bill Rhode, who resented Beard’s solo effort to profit off the business and his references in the text to “my shop”; upon joining the staff of Gourmet as an editor in 1943, Rhode saw to it that Beard didn’t write for the magazine, and this blacklisting lasted until Rhode’s death in 1946.

While Hors d’Oeuvre and Canapés was a minor work, it sold well enough to prompt its publisher, M. Barrows & Company, to commission Cook It Outdoors, Beard’s paean to grilling. The book had sixteen different recipes for barbecue sauce and twelve for hamburgers, but it was no Dave Thomas–style sop to dumb, torpid lugs; it included, audaciously for the time, a recipe for a “Pascal Burger” of ground lamb and lamb kidneys and a “Bagdad [sic] Burger” served between two slices of grilled eggplant. There were also elaborate instructions on how to build one’s own backyard barbecue pit, and a recipe entitled “If You Should Run Over an Old Hen” that began, “Such things happen, this running over a farmer’s hen . . .” Clearly, Beard was eager to get the fellas involved in the dying art of home cookery, too, by appealing to their machismo. The jacket copy, if anything, protested too much: “It is a man’s book written by a man who understands not only the healthy outdoor eating and cooking habits, but who is an expert at the subtle nuances of tricky flavoring as well . . . A good workable book that will take a heck of a lot of wear and be a darned good companion to the outdoor cook.”

“It’s very important that Jim was a man,” says Barbara Kafka. “That’s how he made a difference. Historically, you had cookbooks and cookery writing by two groups of people, women and chefs. And, as in so many things, Jim was a crossover person. Also, because he wasn’t afraid to be enthusiastic, he went right to the heart of people. His real talent was for the American voice.” Beard’s considerable girth, far from turning people off, abetted his crossover appeal, because he wasn’t some fussy schoolmarm or a flaming gadabout like the tails-wearing, Rolls-Royce-driving Lucius Beebe.
“He was not seen as gay by the public,” Kafka says. “If they’d met Jim in person, they might not have been so sure, but he was just seen as a big man, and big is good, in terms of cooking.”

What Beard began, in essence, was a new perception of American food and cookery. If there was no going back to the halcyon days of Mary Randolph’s sumptuous feasts of pure goodness—which were laborious to prepare, and, to face facts, made possible by slaves in the South and servants in the North—there was at least a way to reclaim the pleasures of real cooking and unrushed food, even if only as a leisure activity, as outdoor grilling increasingly became in the 1940s. Whereas Irma Rombauer, the author of *The Joy of Cooking*, represented a sane middle ground for housewives of the thirties and forties, urging them to make their own stocks in the early editions of her book* but advising that “a can of bouillon should be kept for quick aspics and for use in the place of stock”—and explaining that *The Joy of Cooking* had been compiled “with one eye on the family purse and the other on the bathroom scale,” with “occasional lapses into indulgence”—Beard transcended the very notion of cooking as part of homemaking. To him, cooking and eating comprised a fulfilling cultural pastime, to be pursued as ardently as golf, opera, painting watercolors, or any other activity that aroused one’s passions. In the bargain, with his charisma and approachability, he also made a better case for the preservation of regional foods than the zany Clementine Paddleford† or the highbrow Sheila Hibben.

But even as Beard was coming to prominence as a cookbook author,

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*Rombauer, a bourgeois St. Louis housewife of German descent, compiled the first edition of *The Joy of Cooking* in 1931, when she was fifty-four, as an exercise in getting over the 1930 suicide of her husband. The first edition was just a private printing of 3,000 copies, but the subsequent edition, published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1936, became a national best seller. At the time of Rombauer’s death in 1962, more than 26 million copies of the book, in its various editions, had been sold. Though Rombauer kept her distance from the “gourmet” ranks, she forged close friendships with both Beard and Cecily Brownstone.*

†Beard admired Paddleford, though, remarking that she is “surely the getting-aroundest person I have ever known, except for Eleanor Roosevelt,” and he socialized with her frequently.
he saw that the state of American gastronomy would get worse before it got better. Throughout and immediately after the war years of the forties, the big food conglomerates were putting ever-more grotesque packaged products on the market, many of which were by-products of their efforts to produce tinned or freeze-dried field rations for the troops. (However, Spam, George A. Hormel & Co.'s “miracle meat” in a can, predated America’s involvement in the war, appearing on grocery shelves in 1937.) In time, the packaged-food companies would abandon any pretense of claiming their processed and frozen products were superior in taste, instead stressing their convenience. Cannily (and often with canned foods), these companies’ advertising campaigns actually stigmatized the experience of spending hours in the kitchen. As Laura Shapiro puts it in Something from the Oven, her history of 1950s American cookery, “During the postwar era, time became an obsession of the food industry and eventually of American homemakers as a manufactured sense of panic pervaded even day-to-day cooking.” Shapiro cites an ad for Minute Rice that sounds like it was written by someone hopped up on Dexedrine: “Baby fussing? Dinner to get? When baby wants attention and Daddy wants dinner, your best friend is quick-quick Minute Rice!”

Beard despaired of such developments, and of the nonsensical recipes that were urged upon readers by the women’s pages, such as a popular one for “Flapper Salad,” an atrocity that called for a canned pear or peach to be decorated with carrot slivers and/or pimientos to simulate the face of a 1920s flapper, with the fruit then covered in aspic, surrounded by lettuce, and covered in a sweet dressing. “I showed [the recipe] to someone who took it seriously,” Beard wrote to his friend Helen Evans Brown, a Californian and cookbook author and kindred-spirit food purist. “God, where can their sense of humor be?”

Fortunately, Beard and Brown didn’t have to fight their battle alone. One of the salutary effects of the war was that it caused an influx of talented kitchen workers whose cooking abilities and regard for real food complemented Beard’s nicely. Though William Henry Harrison’s cronies might not have approved, these influential newcomers were French.