

In a Crowded Kitchen

A CULINARY AND LITERARY PORTRAIT OF
GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

HEATHER HARTLEY



Hors d'oeuvres cubistes, orphistes, futuristes, etc.

Poisson de l'ami Méritarte

Zone de contrefilet à la Croniamental

Acrelin de chapon à l'Hérésiarque

Méditations esthétiques en salade

Fromages en cortège d'Orphée

Fruits du Festin d'Ésope

Biscuits du Brigadier masqué

Vin blanc de l'Enchanteur

Vin rouge de la Case d'Armons

Champagne des Artilleurs

Café des Soirées de Paris

Alcools

In 1916, two years before the death of French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, his friends honored him with a lavish banquet in Paris—over eighty guests attended, including Picasso, poet Max Jacob, and Cubist painter Juan Gris, who served as emcee. Such sumptuous, voluptuous banquets were very popular in Paris up until the 1920s—any old excuse for a party would do. Undernourished, zealous poets, painters, sculptors, and various bohemians could fête their friends (or acquaintances or enemies) and eat a lot of marvelous food. And Apollinaire's banquet was no different—except that each course cleverly refers to one of his poetry books or other writings, combining some of his most famous works with capons, cookies, and champagne into an appetizing Modernist mélange.

The sizable banquet menu, common in Paris at the turn of the century, showcased traditional French fare, original variations on it, and the sheer volume of good food available in Paris in the '20s. The feeding frenzy may have been in reaction to the Commune of Paris of 1871 when, after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, a bloody civil uprising took place in the capital. During the brief, chaotic rule of the socialist, reformist government that followed, Parisians were forced to eat horse, rat, bear, donkey, dog, and cat, according to Romantic poet Victor Hugo. No wonder Apollinaire and his contemporaries were inventing Cubist appetizers and Orphic cheese courses.



His gourmandise was incredible. Apollinaire would feast upon meats, bread, wine and bouillon and then he would sit down to work until late in the evening.

—poet and friend Francis Carco

A seminal figure in the Modernist movement, Apollinaire was involved in many avant-garde groups, including Naïve art, Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism. He is also credited with inventing the word *surrealism*. With such a significant place in the modern literary world, it's curious that little has been written about his obsession with food and drink. Yet an obsession it was: in magazines, newspapers, books, and plays he often wrote about his favorite foods: seafood, fowl, pot-au-feu, stew, risotto, *sanguins* (a rich orange-colored mushroom found in the south of France), Corsican sausage (in Apollinaire's words, "C'est là une

charcuterie de l'Olympe”), oranges, grapes, apples, and sweets of all sorts—he ate just about everything but raw red meat. He was clearly not fussy about regional French foods. Nor was he a culinary chauvinist; in addition to traditional French cooking, he enjoyed Hungarian, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Greek, Turkish, and African cuisine. And Apollinaire wrote about them all.

His recipes for dishes like omelet with sea urchins and *blaff de maquereaux* (a mysterious mackerel entrée) can be found in numerous issues of the magazine *Mercur de France*, while the erotic novel *Les onze mille verges: or, The amorous adventures of Prince Mony Vibescu* is a cornucopia of sexy fruits. In his book *The Heresiarch and Co.*, Apollinaire wrote about the pungent smells of street markets in the south of France, where he spent his childhood: “The old part of Nice was filled with the odor of fruits and herbs and spices mixed with raw meat, . . . cod and toilets.” Introverted gourmands could turn to the “Small Modern Magical Recipes” chapter of *The Poet Assassinated*, which includes an original recipe: *eau-de-vie pour bien parler*. His verse play *Le Marchand d’anchois*, written in collaboration with André Salmon, includes the savory lines “The anchovy invigorates sex / Its exciting, night and day, / There are no bones and it’s soft.” (Who thought an anchovy could be so arousing? I’ve always prudishly picked them out of my *salade niçoise*.) Apollinaire was a serious connoisseur and a vociferous critic. His friends knew him as a gourmand. He could also be a real pig.

Et tu bois cet alcool brûlant comme ta vie
Ta vie que tu bois comme une eau-de-vie

—Apollinaire

Le Crucifix, Cardinal, Téléphone, Zut, Balzar, Onimus, La Closerie des Lilas—these bars were just a few of Apollinaire’s preferred haunts. The aperitif hour almost always united the poet and his friends, often in Montmartre or Montparnasse. “I’ve been very drunk lately,” Apollinaire wrote to a friend in 1904. (Actually, this line could have been written anywhere from 1900 to 1918, as Apollinaire loved to toast friends and lovers and himself.) Some of the most potent drinks he imbibed on a regular basis were *cocktails carabinés*, or raging cocktails—invented by some well-lubricated Norwegian friends. The drinks were a decoction of meat in stout or port, and absinthe grog with either lemon juice or a dash of juniper-berry liqueur, and some uncertain ingredient called “advokaat.” *Cocktail carabiné* or not, much of what he drank was strong enough to level the portliest of poets. Apollinaire’s short list included: vermouth, beer, Rhine wines, absinthe (or *l’herbe sainte* according to Verlaine), and *chartreuse verte* (a little number that included a pinch of crushed snakeskin). The possible etymological origins of one special libation, called *vespétro*, tickled Apollinaire pink: one source says *vespétro* derives from the French verb *vesser*, literally meaning “to fart”

or “to burp.” A more demure version states that the word is of Latinate origin, *vesper*, or “evening”—therefore a liqueur to drink after an evening meal. Whatever its origin, one must make advance reservations with *vespétro*: the recipe calls for a seven-day maceration period. Ingredients include, among other things, angelica, fennel, coriander, a liter of eau-de-vie, and a lot of sugar. Aperitifs, *cocktails carabinés*, and digestifs were an integral part of Apollinaire’s daily habits—so much so that in 1913, he titled one of his most famous poetry collections after this *idée fixe*: *Alcools*.

He had this robust stoutness that gave him a lot of authority. Gourmand, huge, appetizing to look at, he looked like some hilarious god. . . . The more he ate, the more a physical cheerfulness radiated all through him.

—Francis Carco

The significance of Apollinaire’s *l’embonpoint*, or stoutness, cannot be overlooked. Being overweight was chic: paunch meant prosperity. French adjectives abound to describe fashionable flab: *bien enrobé*, *rondeurs exquisés*, *grassouillettes*, *dodu*, *potelé*, *cosu*, *ventripotent*. Fat sounds infinitely more elegant in French than in English. (Compare, for example, *l’embonpoint* to “lard ass.”) Though Apollinaire did not have a lot of money to eat, he had a doting, dominating mother and many friends who all made sure he was well fed. A liter-

ary critic once wrote approvingly to Apollinaire, “You live on rue Gros and it suits you well!” During the Belle Époque, your morning coat may have been worn thin, but as long as your love handles were bursting through your buttons, you could surely be numbered among the elite crowd.



The kitchen was a very small room lit by a skylight, with a nasty little table, wobbly chairs and chipped plates. When Apollinaire stood there, one would think that you were in a king’s palace. He would smoke, all red and smiling, happy and proud. He was going to eat. . . . You could only see his joy, his smile and his appetite.

—Philippe Soupault, poet and admirer of Apollinaire

Apollinaire’s kitchen on boulevard Saint-Germain was a sort of *cuisine-cabinet-de-toilette* complete with bathtub, sink, a small range with two gas plaques, and a blue-green enamel oven. In this humble apartment (which Apollinaire called his *pigeonnier*, or pigeon roost), friends like Picasso, Max Jacob, André Salmon, and Ambroise Vollard would frequently come over for lunch or dinner. To create his meals, Apollinaire spent a lot of time haunting secondhand bookstores and the Bibliothèque nationale in search of fresh recipes. He pestered Parisian chefs and hostesses for the secret ingredients of his favorite dishes, discussed recipes with his friends, made suggestions, remarked on faults, and debated his dinners down to

the last grain of salt. Once, at a dinner party, he went so far as to bar everyone from the kitchen so that his hostess could focus all of her gracious hospitality on the perfect lobster. His personal book collection included *La Cuisinière poétique*, *Sur la Psychologie du goût*, and *Le Manuel culinaire aphrodisiaque, à l'usage des adultes des deux sexes*.

The recipes of this last book were said to heighten erotic powers, though Apollinaire did not need any assistance. According to the “manual,” two recipes were particularly potent: a celery base and an artichoke puree cooked in salt, lemon, thick béchamel sauce, butter, and cream. He must have been on a strict diet of artichoke puree when he met Louise de Coligny-Châtillon—his *bien-aimée* in a lusty brief liaison: “Your breasts have a slight taste of persimmons and barbaric figs, / Your hips, candied fruit, I adore them, my darling.” In Apollinaire’s pigeon roost, it was literally one jump from the kitchen to the bed.

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No making love now, my little chicken  
Make us a good little meal.

—Apollinaire

In his relationship with painter Marie Laurencin, Apollinaire was the director and dictator of his crowded kitchen. Though he produced fabulous meals in his *cuisine-cabinet-de-toilette*, when poor Marie cooked, it was often the same simple meal

of *saucisson*, risotto, and beef stew. According to Apollinaire, she was not gifted in the kitchen or in bed. One evening he gave her a good verbal thrashing over an ill-prepared risotto; at another *soirée* she was admonished for not being able to set the table properly. Yet their relationship lasted from 1907 to 1913—perhaps it was a poorly puffed soufflé that put an end to it all? He did find it in his heart to affectionately call Marie *mon sucre* in their more tender moments.

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She offers you two meals on a Sunday—enough food to make you ill—because everything is so delicious. Then she gives you full packets and baskets under each arm to take back on the last train to Paris.

—a Danish friend of Apollinaire

The first doggie bag may well have been invented by Angelica de Kostrowistky, a gorgeous, rebellious, man-eating high roller of a woman—Apollinaire's mother. Daughter of a Polish count and an Italian woman, at sixteen Angelica was kicked out of her convent school, Collège des Dames françaises du Sacré Coeur, for bad behavior—an auspicious beginning for such a passionate, tyrannical, possessive, and authoritarian woman. Like her son, she was also an incredible gourmand. Poor as she was—and her finances depended largely on her luck at casinos—Angelica loved to cook and was inventive with the few ingredients that were available to her.

As her house was a crowded menagerie of bric-a-brac, furniture of all styles, dogs, a monkey, and a parrot, the kitchen was probably a haven for both her and her son. Apollinaire was proud of his mother's cooking and took great pleasure in sharing it with his friends. Though Angelica loved to feed Apollinaire, she was none too fond of these friends—uncouth, sloppy heathens living in the bowels of Paris. Commenting on her tempestuous and judgmental nature, Apollinaire wrote, “With my mother, it's always a malediction right away!” Still, despite her vehement disapproval of Apollinaire's companions, everyone who took the train out to Le Vésinet for Sunday lunch or dinner left her home with full stomachs and a remembrance of her: a doggie bag *à la française* filled with fresh ravioli, crusty bread, cornichons, fat plums in eau-de-vie, and apricot jam.

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I've noticed . . . that people who know how to eat are never idiots.

—Apollinaire

When poet Max Jacob first met Apollinaire, he described his remarkable “terrible and brilliant hazelnut eyes [and Apollinaire's] tiny mouth like a pepper.” If Apollinaire had been painted by the portraitist Giuseppe Arcimboldo, I think that each feature of the poet's face would be a meticulous rendering of a different food. Emerging from the somber background,

his eyes rounded hazelnuts, his ears delicate candied fruits, his mouth a little red pepper, his eyebrows tiny oily anchovies, his cheeks plump sweet-smelling oranges, his nose a croissant, his neck thick rolls of country sausage tucked one upon another, and his hair powdered with inky spices. In the murky background, it would be difficult to distinguish his shadow from the dark pools of rich wines, from the silhouettes of lovers, poets, painters, singers. If you were to look closely enough, you would realize that the portrait was composed of thousands of minuscule letters in every possible color—each portion of his face really a poem, a word—capturing the perishable and the permanent in the puzzle of his face.



Apollinaire's love affair with food and drink lasted until his death at age thirty-eight in 1918 when, already weakened by a serious head injury from the First World War, he succumbed to the Spanish flu epidemic running rampant throughout Paris. Despite numerous complications caused by his head injury, Apollinaire continued to go out for meals, invite friends over for dinner, and regularly publish recipes in the *Mercure de France*. A few months before the poet's death, friend Maurice de Vlaminck wrote that "he still had his marvelous appetite and, at each dinner, devoured ham, partridge and a half-bottle of brandy."

At this point in his life, the poet must have been a sight to see: a huge man staggering through the streets, holding

court in cafés, devouring dish after dish with grease on his chin, winking at whores, laughing, drinking, smoking. At the same time, I think that Apollinaire was a fragile man—a small shadow slanting against the night-quiet Haussmann buildings, looking up beyond the mansard roofs to the distant sky, alone, out of breath.



Last night in La Régalade, a cramped bistro tucked away in the 14th arrondissement, after the *terrines de campagne* and *petits cornichons fait maison* had been passed graciously from table to table, and as plate after plate of fantastic dishes flew by, I thought of Apollinaire. Food permeates his work—sometimes it is just a stanza, other times the main ingredient in a story, or simply a dash of dark liqueur to finish off a line of poetry. One gourmandise inspires another: his appetite for food cannot be separated from his appetite for words. Apollinaire wrote sensual, vivid, innovative poems, partly due to his profound appreciation for and love of food. His lush descriptions of women, the fragrant and stinking smells of Paris and its streets and markets and early mornings—these are palpable and poignant sensations in Apollinaire's work. He enjoyed indulging in evocative words and images, and, when reading his poems, I have no choice but to participate in the feast. To consider Apollinaire from the angle of the dinner table is to see an essential facet of his personality and his poetry, revealing a side that is fragile, mortal, and hungry.

**RECIPE***Risotto with Piedmontese Truffles*

This recipe was one of Apollinaire's preferred side dishes and can accompany seafood, beef, chicken, vegetables, etc. The secret to success is not to leave the risotto, not even for a minute, until it's completely cooked—and not a second more. (This last trick must have been poor Marie Laurencin's downfall . . .)

serves 6

**INGREDIENTS:**

- 1 1/2 quarts beef or veal bouillon
- 1 pound Arborio rice
- 1 cup butter
- 1/8 pound raw chopped beef marrow
- 2 finely chopped shallots
- 1 finely chopped onion
- 2 or 3 raw white Piedmontese truffles, preferably with a garlic taste (or frankly any truffle, if you can't make it to Italy this weekend)
- 1/2–2/3 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- A pinch of cayenne pepper

Carefully wash and dry the truffles, cut them into strips, and set them aside. In a saucepan, melt the butter on low heat and add the chopped onion, shallots, and beef marrow, then turn the heat up to medium. Add a pinch of cayenne pepper and be sure not to brown anything. Next, add the rice, mixing well and spreading it evenly throughout the saucepan. Add approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of bouillon, stirring constantly at a low temperature. When the rice has absorbed all of the bouillon, continue to add  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup at a time at a slow pace, making sure that no grains stick to the bottom of the pan. Continue stirring until all of the bouillon has been absorbed. Just before serving the risotto, add the truffles, and then sprinkle everything with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.