



# The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food

*Adam Gopnik*

Download now

Read Online →

# The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food

*Adam Gopnik*

## **The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food** Adam Gopnik

Transplanted Canadian, *New Yorker* writer and author of *Paris to the Moon*, Gopnik is publishing this major new work of narrative non-fiction alongside his 2011 Massey Lecture. An illuminating, beguiling tour of the morals and manners of our present food manias, in search of eating's deeper truths, asking "Where do we go from here?"

Never before have so many North Americans cared so much about food. But much of our attention to it tends towards grim calculation (what protein is best? how much?); social preening ("I can always score the last reservation at xxxxx"); or graphic machismo ("watch me eat this now"). Gopnik shows we are not the first food fetishists but we are losing sight of a timeless truth, "the table comes first": what goes on around the table matters as much to life as what we put on the table: families come together (or break apart) over the table, conversations across the simplest or grandest board can change the world, pain and romance unfold around it—all this is more essential to our lives than the provenance of any zucchini or the road it travelled to reach us. Whatever dilemmas we may face as omnivores, how not what we eat ultimately defines our society.

Gathering people and places drawn from a quarter century's reporting in North America and France, *The Table Comes First* marks the beginning a new conversation about the way we eat now.

## **The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food Details**

Date : Published October 25th 2011 by Knopf Canada (first published 2011)

ISBN : 9780307399014

Author : Adam Gopnik

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Food and Drink, Food, Nonfiction, Cultural, France, Writing, Essays, Travel, Cooking, History, Food Writing, Cookbooks, Autobiography, Memoir

 [Download The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meanin ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food**  
Adam Gopnik

---

## **From Reader Review *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food* for online ebook**

### **Elizabeth Theiss says**

Keeping company with Adam Gopnik is reminiscent of conversation at a long French dinner party where food, philosophy and life are woven into a deeply enjoyable tapestry. At the end, we sigh and move on with our lives and the happy memory of an evening well-spent.

Gopnik's essays touch on some of my favorite topics--wine and Parkerism, the history of restaurants, the ethics of locavorism, food as art and the art of cooking. I can't say I always agree with him, but I invariably appreciate the ideas he brings to the table.

Let's talk about wine for a minute. I cannot agree that wine quality is entirely a matter of individual taste. If you've tasted a first-growth Bordeaux or an excellent burgundy, it is hard to believe that you could then assert that a California zip code wine is somehow equivalent. Yes, descriptive adjectives help wine drinkers to distinguish subtle flavors, and the setting in which wine is served influences our opinions of it. Yet, a good wine is distinctive in the pleasure it provides and very different from a bad wine, which is likely to make an entire table wince.

---

### **James Smith says**

Reading Gopnik is a bit like reading David Foster Wallace: makes me both aspire ("I want to write like that!") and despair ("I could never write like that!"). Don't be fooled: this is a philosophy book--a smart, meaty [sic!] meditation on politics, meaning, and the good life.

---

### **Todd says**

Among the most self-indulgent, over-intellectualized works I've ever encountered--and I actually enjoyed law school. Given my enjoyment of Mr. Gopnik's other work, I am a little surprised to have been so annoyed by this one. However, after suffering through dozens of pages on "taste" as characterized by Hume, Rousseau, Veblen, Becker and others, I suppose I shouldn't.

That said, the sparkle and wit so common to his writing occasionally shines through--in his "correspondence" with Elizabeth Pennell and the chapter "In Vino Veritas," for example.

Gopnik is unquestionably passionate about food and has thought deeply and carefully about the subject. However, the book seems far too overwrought to me, its efforts to elevate the everyday a stretch.

De gustibus non est disputandum . . . indeed.

---

## **Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says**

“In cooking you begin with the ache and end with the object, where in most of the life of the appetites---courtship, marriage---you start with the object and end with the ache.”

Do you see why I love Adam Gopnik? He can take the simplest of activities---like cooking, for example---and he can find great wisdom there. Half the time I don't understand what he's talking about as I'm reading along; it's only later, when I'm looking over his words again, that his thoughts become clear to me.

Here's another example of Gopnik's wisdom that often goes over my head in a first reading, truth that is wiser than simple information about cooking and eating: “It seems to me that the real spirit of localism---the thing most worth taking from it---is the joke: the playful idea of the pleasure of adventure, the idea, at the heart of most aesthetic pleasures, that by narrowing down, closing up, the area of our inquiry, we can broaden out and open up the possibilities of our pleasures.”

And not only does he find deep wisdom in simple activity, but he shares his ruminations with a cleverness that few essayists display:

“Yes, of course, everybody's recipe is someone else's recipe, with the exception of those few rare new things that someone really did invent....But there is a recipe that has, so to speak, through suffering become yours, unlike those that you have simply copied out of a book. We recognize the concept of sweat equity in recipe writing: if you have labored nightly over a stove in a restaurant kitchen cooking the thing, then you can write it down, even if its origins lie ultimately not in your own mind but in someone else's cooking.”

“The good food of twenty-five years ago always looks unhealthy; the good food of fifty years ago always looks unappetizing; and the good food of a hundred years ago always looks inedible.”

“On the other hand, or in the other fork....”

And beneath his wisdom and his cleverness, Gopnik shares little tidbits of the craft that help us all:

Gopnik suggests that everything is better by adding a little saffron and cinnamon or bacon and anchovies.

He also shares the surprising truth that good cooks either go very hot or surprisingly cold. They have time.

---

## **Sara says**

okay, you tell me...

"As museums cross, or so Updike tells us, with the mystique of women, restaurants cross in memory with the optimism of childhood, with birthdays, promises, quiet, and the guilty desires of childhood, too: special treatment, special favours. The Cardinal who never arrives, who sweeps you up into his carriage saying, 'Child, you please me,' becomes the Maitre d' who says, 'Ah, sir, we're so glad to see you!'(page 17)

Come on, that is ridiculous writing. If you make an obscure reference, please let people know WTF you're talking about. Museums cross with the mystique of women do they? How, please tell me? And who is this cardinal you keep referring to, who never arrives but also sweeps me off my feet? What if I've never read Updike; it would help to know which book you're referencing and maybe the context.

Or how about something Gopnik refers to as the dirty-sounding "familiar wet progression"(p. 26): "We would be have been struck, for one thing, by how odd their drinking habits were, with sweet wines offered throughout the meal - sherries and ports. The familiar wet progression - starting with champagne, and then a bottle of white wine, on to red wine, then liqueurs and brandies, ending with a sweet wine - is a late invention, and largely English." How odd, indeed! I know, I never go to a restaurant without having a wet progression. Those 18th century barbarians didn't start with champagne!

I've only just started the book, but I have been moved by Gopnik's pompous, bourgeois writing to post my first-ever review.

Anyway, if you like this sort of thing, the book is full of it, so please enjoy.

---

### **Michele says**

Adam Gopnik reads like MFK Fisher, minus heart, charm, or lovely turns of phrase.

While some of his writing did have humor, I could almost hear the *New Yorker* guffaws after punch lines.

Overall, his style didn't appeal to me. Neither did sentences like this one:

"I notice that, in your essay on the perfect dinner, you dish-drop *pommes soufflées*."

*\*insert pompous guffaw\**

I thought the current movement in food has been about making food more accessible, but with this book, Adam Gopnik does nothing to further that cause.

---

### **Linda says**

I loved Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon* and so was delighted to see that the library has another book by the same author. Culinary, French, what could be better? I'm finding myself skimming, skipping much of the book; however, some parts are interesting. I'll reserve judgement.

Okay ... I should just erase the above. As I picked up the book a second time, I knew I needed to start anew and read with a fresher and keener eye; in doing so I realized the full circle the author had come from beginning to end. Mr. Gopnik takes the reader on a tour of the history of food and food styles, changes along the way, the importance in society of sitting down to the table, the memories that are created in doing so. Along the way he creates a second story of sorts in his imaginary emails to English writer Elizabeth Pennell - they share a love of cuisine; the author also uses the emails to ultimately share a universal truth that seems not in keeping with the story but which ties into the beginning and end of the book. In all, *The Table Comes First* is a wonderful and interesting whirlwind into the wide world of food.

---

## **Kristen says**

I listened to this on audiobook, read by the author. Gopnik's clear passion for the subject and his enthusiastic storytelling made it perhaps more enjoyable than it might have been to read.

The history, stories, and anecdotes he provides are all entertaining and informative, and Gopnik's style funny and approachable, but the structure of the book was a bit distracting. Toward the beginning Gopnik states that in the current world of foodies, food writers, locavores, etc., the focus of the meal has become the food itself, not the joys of the table; the company, the conversation, the progression of the courses, etc. We nod our heads in agreement and expect him to then expound on this, showing us the error of our ways and how we should return our attention to the whole of the meal.

However, what follows is a collection of rambling essays on the history of the restaurant, the history of recipe books, the state of contemporary chefs and so forth, all seen through Gopnik's Francophile eyes. These are punctuated by emails to a deceased food writer, which he uses as a device to tell his personal histories related to food and to relay his own favorite recipes or cooking tips.

While I enjoyed the book from beginning to end, it seemed to me a bit disjointed and scattered. Almost as if the author were trying to cram too much in and lost his train of thought in the process.

ADD: Currently half way through Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon*, which I quite like. I feel I may have gone at "Table" with the wrong expectations, not having been familiar with his work, but having read umpteen food writers. Perhaps I was expecting it to be more of a comprehensive, persuasive essay than a series of stories.

---

## **Sharlene says**

This wasn't what I was expecting.

What was I expecting?, you might ask. A sort of history, evaluation of the current state of the culinary world, the progress it has made, from home-cooked to fine dining. It was, and it wasn't.

It took me three weeks to read this book. And that involved a LOT of skimming. Because while Gopnik is full of passion about food and eating (mostly French/French-styled food), he enjoys a too long philosophical ramble, one which leaves more questions than answers, and sometimes it's all a bit too preachy like he's glaring at us from his high culinary pulpit especially when he's going on about the meat-vs-veg debate (nevertheless to say, I skimmed that chapter).

I hesitate to recommend *The Table Comes First* to anyone, even if you are a foodie. I mean, I love to eat and read about food and all that, but how I struggled with this book. It was not a fun read, it wasn't all that insightful either. It was too Franco-centric, largely ignoring most of the non-western world. It is obvious that his target audience are those who have already eaten at Momofuku and El Bulli and all those 'top' restaurants.

However, if I hadn't read it, I would not have come across to Elizabeth Pennell, whose 1900 book *The Feasts of Autolycus, the Diary of a Greedy Woman* (available as an ebook here) begins:

“Gluttony is ranked among the deadly sins; it should be honoured among the cardinal virtues.”

Gopnik decides to start ‘emailing’ Elizabeth Pennell, which is a little silly, but at other times, entertaining as he details his attempts in the kitchen.

And even more so for that great bibliography at the end because with the exception of the Steinberger book, I have not heard of any of them. And these definitely sound more up my alley.

---

### **Christine says**

I remember enjoying "From Paris to the Moon" when I read it several years ago. I wish I could say his writing style stayed the same. The best thing about this book is the introduction. No kidding. The rest was full of overwrought phrases, references that were so tedious that I didn't even bother to look them up, and so much pretentious, page-filling tripe that I skipped about 30% of this book, just to get to the good historical and sociological parts. If you're not a confident person, this book will make you feel like a dolt. To me, it was just a load of crap. This could have been a great subject, had someone with an accessible writing style, a la Bill Bryson, had tackled it. Gopnik should just stick to the New Yorker and spare us all the glitterati literati junk. I would give this 2 stars just for the intro and good historical content, but it left such a bad taste in my mouth, that 1 star was all I could muster.

---

### **Dan says**

Adam Gopnik is my favorite current writer of nonfiction. He's brilliant and often funny. He loves his family, France, and food. Though not overtly political, he has liberal sensibilities. He has a wide range of interests in sync with my own, including urbanism, sports, classic novels, and music from Bach to the Stones. And he has interesting insights into aspects of daily life that most of us take for granted. So there are always some great nuggets in anything he writes, but this book is a disappointment. For starters, he takes far too intellectual and abstract an approach to earthy subjects; there are too many food critics here and not enough cooks and eaters. The structure of the book is bizarre: each section begins with a tangent to "the table" and ends with an e-mail to Elizabeth Pennell, a 19th century food writer (I get the idea - it's a way to comment on how radically cooking & dining have changed - but it comes off as strained). And way too many of the paragraphs have the same structure: opening abstract statement (usually about appetite or desire), some USA Today-style pop psychosociology ("We" want this or that), and closing bons mots based on more abstractions. If I'd ordered this book in a restaurant, I'd have sent it back to the kitchen.

---

### **Maureen M says**

Here's my review for the Star Tribune newspaper:

For his last meal on earth, Adam Gopnik would have roast chicken with lemon and an apricot souffle for dessert. Or maybe beef with béarnaise sauce, with chocolate pot-au-crème for dessert. Questions of food consume Gopnik in “The Table Comes First: Family, France and the Meaning of Food,” an exploration of eating from the earliest restaurant in pre-Revolutionary Paris to what we find at our dinner tables now.

Gopnik travels from the United States to Europe, from the past to the cutting edge, posing the question: Why do we eat what we eat?

The book has the outline of a meal — starters through dessert — and the unevenness of a progressive dinner. Some stops are delightful. Others disappoint.

Gopnik is at his best when he's out exploring, and is at his weakest when he's giving history lectures.

This book lacks the charm of "Paris to the Moon," Gopnik's 1990s collection of essays for the *New Yorker* when he was a new father introducing his little boy to Paris. But he recaptures that spirit in places.

It's there when he introduces us to the death-row inmate contemplating his favorite meals.

It's there when he introduces Elizabeth Pennell, a Victorian-era food critic with un-Victorian attitudes toward food and sex. He is so taken with this "Nigella Lawson of the age of Whistler" that he strikes up an imaginary correspondence, dropping e-mails to Pennell between chapters like palate cleansers.

It's there when his son, now a teenager, makes a cameo appearance. Father, son and daughter forage Central Park in search of edible greens in an entertaining test of the eat-local movement.

Gopnik's long experience with France and fine dining yields some fine observations. He sees the provocation in the word "Le Fooding," concocted to poke French cuisine off its pedestal and back into the culinary game. He taps Minnesota's own Thorstein Veblen, a 19th-century economist, to explain food trends.

In places, you feel as if you're sitting across the table from an amusing friend recounting his adventures. In others, you feel like the outsider at a dinner party where the conversation drones on about people and places you don't know.

Then comes dessert, and all is well again. Like the "techno-emotional" dessert wizards he visits in Spain, Gopnik saves his best for last: "What is it that we want from eating? Comfort? Absolutely. A symbol of love shared? For sure. ... We can have our cake and eat it, too, if we are willing to see that the point of having cake is to eat it and accept that then it will be gone."

---

## **Charles says**

Following a truly brilliant introduction ("A Small Starter: Questions of Food"), the rest was almost unreadable.

I tried very hard to finish this book, but eventually conceded that it was too much work, since, overall, what I was learning seemed to have little practical value to me.

But for whom would this read as entertainment? Wandering prose, elitist foodie references, and writing that seems far too enamored of itself.

Buried within the minutiae are some very intriguing insights about the meaning of food in our culture, but it was too easy to lose sight of that. Gopnik is in need of a good editor.

(Maybe one day, when I am more advanced in my knowledge of obscure food lore, and thus able to parse his references without finding them so distracting, I will give this one another try.)

---

## **Zvi says**

[Overdrive eBook] Fascinating essays on many aspects of food -- including explorations of the origin of the restaurant and cookbooks, a discussion of the current reigning culinary trends, a dialog with a food writer of



the late 19th century that Gopnik feels close to, and other amusing bits -- even some recipes. Gopnik overwrites, but forgivably; his essays are such clever triumphs of philosophical wordplay that even when the balloon is full of nothing but hot air, we can admire the precision of the animal shapes that he twists them into. I read a library copy and will pick up my own copy to keep -- if only for the recipes and philosophy of cooking he espouses.

---

## **Vuk Trifkovic says**

Mixed feelings about this book. For a start, I felt starved for proper writing about writing about the food. We're all deluged with cook-books, culinary supplements, restaurant reviews, but there is very little writing about this trend. So, who better to do it but Adam Gopnik, essayist supreme of New Yorker fame.

Indeed, he does a very good job, but perhaps he's little bit too good. The essays are great, but feel bit winding and not in 'this is where my mind takes me' and more along the lines of 'what was I saying again'. There are some very clever ploys too, like the progression of topics from the start of the restaurant meal to desert or imaginary correspondence with Elizabeth Purnell.

However, there are slippages and missteps. After a while, the email series gets bit laboured and topics bit jumbled. "Fooding" movement for instance, makes two rather disjointed appearances even though it's quiet obvious that neither the author really finds there is much to it, nor they seem to be capable of keeping reader's attention.

Having said all that, Gopink's writing is wonderful, UK edition hardcover is a wonderful object and there's precious little writing of this caliber out there. It's just frustrating that the author did not go the extra mile in this one, even though he's patiently capable of it.

---