

books

Michael Steinberger '89

Au Revoir To All That

Bloomsbury, 2009

We've all had those meals, the ones that stick in your brain and replay themselves again and again. You can still taste the pork belly, or the wild salmon, or the morel mushrooms; you can still recall the pinot gris.

Journalist and *Slate* wine columnist Michael Steinberger has enjoyed more than his share of memorable meals, many of which occurred in France. His first book, *Au Revoir to All That*, opens with an account of one of the most unforgettable, a dinner ten years ago with his wife at a highly regarded Strasbourg restaurant called Au Crocodile. They ordered the *baeckeofe*, a traditional Alsatian stew in which the chef swapped the customary mix of meats for "an entire lobe of duck liver...

bathed in a truffled bouillon." The dish, Steinberger writes, was "outrageously good—the liver a velvety, earthy, voluptuous mass, the bouillon an intensely flavored broth that flattered everything it touched." The meal concludes with a flirtation, a midnight tour of the kitchen, and an armful of gifts from the chef to Steinberger's wife. "This sort of thing could surely only happen in France, and at that moment, not for the first time, I experienced the most overwhelming surge of affection for her."

While *Au Revoir to All That* is indeed a love letter to French cuisine, it is also an unblinking critique of its modern failings. For Steinberger, who began his journalism career in Hong Kong and has written for a wide array of publications including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Times* of London, the *Economist*, and the *Financial Times*, the

bloom is dangerously close to falling off the rose, and this book—part memoir, part journalistic chronicle—is his effort to make sense of France's shifting gastronomic identity.

With a first chapter devoted to the grandfathers of French cuisine (La Varenne, Brillat-Savarin, Carême, and Escoffier), Steinberger quickly homes in on the Michelin Guide, which he claims has had a "revolutionary influence" on French dining for the past century. Though known for its tires, Michelin's guide to food and its use of stars (*etoiles*) to denote quality has made and broken not only restaurants, but chefs themselves. Steinberger writes: "With a third Michelin star, a chef not only became a gastronomic colossus; he became a cultural icon, as esteemed as any novelist, poet, musician, or artist." The flip side, of course, is that when restaurants lose favor with the



Q&A: Michael Steinberger

Cheryl Sternman Rule: I understand that you spent a lot of time as a journalist in Asia during the mid-1990s before turning to food and wine writing. Where does France enter this picture?

Michael Steinberger: I first went to France when I was thirteen and experienced the odd sensation of feeling as if this was the place I was meant to be; I couldn't quite put words to it at that age, but there was just something about France that really agreed with me, a feeling that was reinforced during subsequent visits there. France fed me better than any other place. It was where my wife [Kathy Brennan '89] and I became romantically involved—it was a country for which I developed the greatest affection, and as I got into writing about wine and food, personal affection was married to professional interest.

CSR: So, including that first trip when you were thirteen, how many times in all have you been to France?

MS: It's not been hundreds of times, but I've lost count. For the book, I made seven trips to France and spent about five months on the ground in total. And, of course, I was drawing in part on material accumulated over the course of a decade of reporting from France.

CSR: You said that France "was a country for which [you] developed the greatest affection," which is interesting, because I very much read *Au Revoir to All That* as sort of a love story, but one in which the main character (i.e. you) is simultaneously captivated by and disappointed, somewhat, in the object of his affection. Is this a fair read?

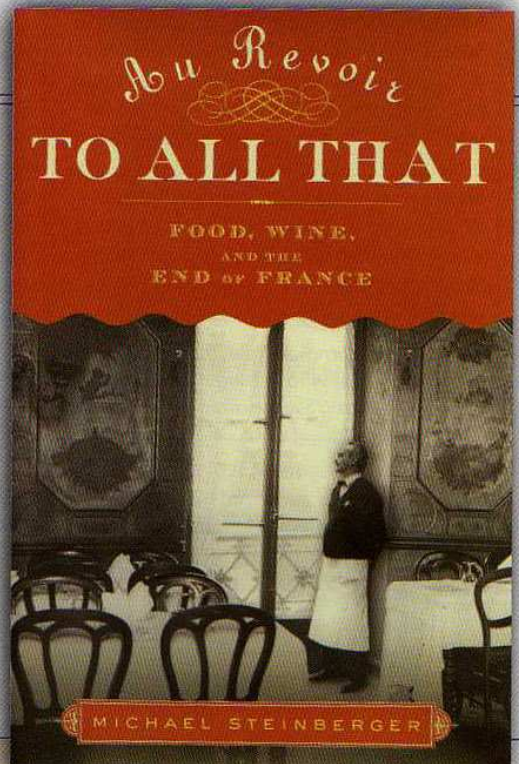
MS: I'm delighted you read it as a love letter to France, because that's really what it is—it is a love letter from a concerned friend. What inspired me to write the book was my disappointment at some of the changes I was seeing in France and a growing feeling that France was

Guide's critics, entire careers can be jeopardized. In one famously tragic case, three star-chef Bernard Loiseau committed suicide soon after his restaurant was downgraded in the 2003 Michelin Guide. Some chefs, in protest of the Guide's undue influence and shroud of secrecy, have even begun giving back their stars.

Steinberger also examines several factors that have led to a questioning, or downright rejection, of the formerly sacrosanct notion that France continues to dominate world gastronomy. One factor is the French government, whose economic policies have stifled innovation and whose failure to integrate the nation's roughly five million immigrants represents, for Steinberger, a missed opportunity for the restaurant industry. Another factor is the influx of fast food culture, part of which reflects a generational shift.

Even home-cooked meals in France are now "slapdash," hastily thrown-together affairs. Couple these changing mores with a rise in the reputations of several non-French chefs, notably those from Spain, Japan, and the U.S., and Steinberger paints a portrait of a country that risks resting "on former glory" rather than adapting to modern tastes and times.

Even as he levels such criticisms, however, Steinberger never loses his wit, and his descriptions of people and meals are both illustrative and often quite funny. Of Camembert producer Francois Durand, he writes: "There was something medieval about Durand. In fact, he was exactly what I imagined a fifteenth-century cheese-making monk would look like. His assistant, a sullen



squandering this wonderful gastronomic heritage. My hope is that in some small way, *Au Revoir*, by calling attention to what is being lost, might help turn things around.

CSR: What was the idea behind your somewhat ambiguous title, *Au Revoir to All That*?

MS: I'd love to take credit for what I think is a really good title, but it was my agent's suggestion, and it was an inspired one. It is a variation, of course, on [poet Robert Graves' famous World War 1 memoir] *Goodbye to All That*. What I especially like about the title is that "au revoir" doesn't just mean "goodbye"—it also means "see you again," and the last third of the book looks at some of the people who are attempting to reinvigorate French cuisine and is actually quite hopeful.

CSR: So you do believe that French gastronomy can indeed recapture some of its former glory, or even break new ground and become a leader once again?

MS: A lot has been lost, and I don't think we'll ever return to a time when France is the unrivaled gastronomic leader—there's too much good food happening in other places now (Spain and the United States, to name just two countries that have experienced culinary revolutions in the last few decades). But there are still a lot of very talented chefs, cheese makers, winemakers, bakers and other culinary artisans in France, and many of them are acutely aware of what has been lost and are working tirelessly to keep their traditions alive and reinvigorate them. As I make clear in the

book, the problem is not that France doesn't produce great chefs anymore; it is that France has been economically stagnant for the better part of the last thirty years, and successive French governments have created a business climate that is distinctly hostile to business. We've gone too far here in de-regulating the economy; France has gone too far in the opposite direction, and French cuisine has paid dearly for it.

CSR: In closing, any advice for fellow alumni who may want to marry great food and wine, writing, and travel? You seem to have crafted a fairly idyllic career...

MS: Journalism is in a really bad place at the moment, ditto publishing, so I wouldn't want to glamorize the work. That said, I feel very fortunate to have been able to develop a career that allows me to do a couple of things that give me limitless pleasure—eating great food, drinking great wine, and writing. My advice to anyone interested in pursuing a similar path is very prosaic: Just go for it. Having gone down the wrong path once (I worked on Wall Street for four years before turning to journalism), I learned that it is much better to be guided by your passions; do what you are really passionate about, and everything else is likely to fall into place. 🐘

woman with an alarmingly full moustache, only amplified the feeling of having stepped into a scene out of the Middle Ages.”

Au Revoir to All That is ultimately a plea from a still ardent fan, and the book ends on a note of optimism when Steinberger returns to a Parisian patisserie to eat a *mille feuille*, a flaky, praline-laced pastry he has adored for many years. He fears, given his recent disillusionment, that the pastry won't live up to his expectations, and yet, it exceeds them. With “bite after blissful bite,” the specimen is even better than the original. And with that, Steinberger leaves the door open for France to win his heart, and ours, once again. 🐿

-Cheryl Sternman Rule '92 is a California food writer whose blog can be found at <http://5secondrule.typepad.com>.
