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## **A Review by Anne Lair of *French Women Don't Get Fat*, by Mirielle Guiliano**

Part of the journal section "Reviews and Responses"

Mirielle Guiliano, *French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure*. New York: Knopf, 2005.

Reviewed by Anne Lair

One of this year's bestsellers in the nation remains *French Women Don't Get Fat*. More than one million copies have been sold already, and this tremendous success may be attributed to the book's topic, food, which is also one of the 'hottest' topics to be studied in terms of anthropology, culture, film, and literature within the last fifteen years. While the volume has received much attention by the mainstream media in the United States, I should like to add a different perspective to such voices: I shall place it in the context of French culture, analyze its popularity in the U.S., and try to explain why it would never achieve the same popularity in France.

During the sixties, the U.S. faced manifold social and political upheavals, and so did France. Following the turmoil of the general insurrection of May 1968, critic Jean Baudrillard wrote about the "consumer society," which mostly focuses on food production and consumption. In the seventies, surveys revealed that the French population started suffering from unbalanced nutrition and was becoming "Americanized" in terms of its food habits. In his study, *The Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Harvard UP, 1984), Pierre Bourdieu, the famous French sociologist, studied the French population. His goal was to define the tastes people develop in the areas of food, decorating, clothing, and the arts. His research included all social classes, which helped him define what he termed the "habitus" of a people. According to Bourdieu, taste can be defined socially and will vary according to social class. Furthermore, the hierarchy of tastes reflects the hierarchy of the social classes. In terms of food, the sociologist noticed that:

- Eating habits vary based on gender inside the same social class.
- The more money a social group makes, the less money is spent on food (in terms of percentage of income), thus enabling wealthier people to consume lighter and more refined products and to have a slimmer body.
- There is a distinction between "luxurious tastes" and "necessary tastes," the former referring to the tastes of the bourgeoisie, whose income keeps them from necessity, the latter to food consumption by the working class.

For the bourgeois, a meal carries a social function, which requires a certain behavior and etiquette at the table, the highlighting of the aesthetic side of the meal, and thus a move away from the

primary function of the meal, which is nourishment. Therefore, for the middle and upper classes, "necessary tastes" are replaced by a social "theatricalization" and an emphasis on aesthetic values. According to Bourdieu, goods and products are less important to them than culinary preparations, creation and invention, and etiquette, all practiced in order to distinguish themselves from the lower social classes. The latter, constrained by their lower income, demonstrate a certain economy of gesture so that theatricalization is limited to major celebrations. The members of the bourgeoisie can choose to buy already prepared dishes, fat-free preparations, which are more expensive than regular products. They tend to select fish, seafood, pâté, exotic products, which are fresh, refined and therefore expensive, whereas the lower classes will select heavy products such as potatoes, pasta, roast, and meat versus fish, which does not "fill up" and is considered as effeminate into the bargain. Members of the lower classes choose these dishes because they are economically limited and therefore constrain themselves to these choices.

In terms of restaurants, members of the middle and upper classes go out more often to eat exotic and/or refined food, whereas the working class prefers to stay home and, if they go out to celebrate a special occasion, will select a restaurant with an ambiance similar to what they are used to in their homes. Food, to them, is a necessary daily event that has a mainly utilitarian importance. Keeping in mind that food takes on different meanings and perspectives depending on class, we can now better analyze the message implicit in *French Women Don't Get Fat*.

Mirielle Guiliano, president and CEO of Veuve Clicquot, USA, offers tips that once helped her loose the weight she put on while an exchange student in Massachusetts. Once back in France, "Dr. Miracle," as she refers to him, came to her rescue with classic nutrition principles of French gastronomy, such that she would not feel deprived of little treats she could have on a weekly basis. After all, balance is what is all important, she was told. As she states it: "This book aims to explain how I do it and, more important, how you can, too. By learning and practicing the way French women traditionally think and act in relation to food and life, you too can do what might seem impossible" (5). With a very upbeat tone, the author gives *trucs* (tips) to loose a few extra pounds and also to 'keep the same silhouette.' She does not mind feeding the reader with some suggestions on how to become more intimate with his/her food and eating habits, advice a native from France may find offensive.

Very early on, the reader is engaged because of the self-help tenor that characterizes the volume. In other words: 'If it works for me, it must work for you as well. Here is how to do it.' This formula, often used in the U.S., works much better in U.S. culture than in France. By over-generalizing and stereotyping French women, Guiliano presents all French women as slim and perfectly pleased with the way they look! Anyone who has visited France lately will have noticed that French women, too, have weight problems. Actually, 40% of French women wear size fourteen and above. As mentioned earlier, French society has been facing nutrition problems since the seventies.

Among Guiliano's tips, we have caviar with *crème fraîche*, smoked salmon, chicken cooked in Champagne, fresh products that can be found at the daily market. All this seems so easy if you live in France or in a large city! Alas, so many of us will run into the impossibility of finding these fresh products anywhere near our homes. Moreover, the imagined reader Guiliano is creating must not work and thus have ample time to run his/her own errands, or has someone else doing the shopping. She continuously refers to finding the time to choose her own fresh fruits and vegetables

which seems unrealistic considering her busy schedule at Veuve Clicquot. We all agree that the fresher food is the better food, which also means that it is the more expensive food, which in turn means that some social groups are excluded from Guiliano's consideration. The French women she might be talking about are members of the very middle and upper classes Bourdieu described twenty years ago. Therefore, what is it that is supposed to be new and exciting about Guiliano's book?

Judging from the culinary aspect, Michel Guérard, the famous three star restaurant chef at Eugénie les Bains, introduced us to the same things almost 30 years ago, in his *Cuisine Minceur* (1976). He gives tips on how to lose weight and still enjoy eating French food; Michel Montignac came out with a similar message in his 1987, *Je mange donc je maigris* ("I eat, therefore I lose weight"). These and many other titles make it clear that Guiliano did not suddenly come up with the idea of combining certain ingredients together in order to lose weight. Actually, as the number of sold copies rises, controversy surrounding her lack of background in nutrition has not affected the sales of her book, regardless of the authoritative criticism.

But who are the readers of this book? Many Americans heard of it because of the numerous newspaper reviews as well as TV and radio broadcasts in major U.S. cities. In addition, the title has a little *je ne sais quoi* with the word "French" that still sounds sophisticated to the American upper and middle classes, who also keep referring to France as a romantic place. The wording "Don't Get Fat" looks very appealing as well, since we all remember Jacqueline Kennedy's silhouette.

Interestingly, the book is not commercialized in France, where it would not sell anyway, and no one has heard of it or its author. The natural way of telling her personal stories renders it interesting for Americans who have toured France, but might sound boring to French readers. The English author Peter Mayle met with a similarly cool reaction from French readers for his series on the Provence region. Reviews of *French Women Don't Get Fat* often present its author as the global CEO of Veuve Clicquot, as a famous chef or a nutrition specialist, although she is none of these. As for many French women living in the U.S., this book reveals stereotypes and false information. Because of this, many of them have decided not to read the book or put it down before finishing it. In fact, historical inaccuracies abound: the Industrial Revolution, which in France happened in the nineteenth century, Guiliano places in the eighteenth; she refers to the eighteenth century as the century of the (French) bourgeoisie, when in reality the age of the bourgeoisie began after the French revolution; and just in case you thought that *Bars à Champagne* exist all over France, you are bound to find *Bars à vin* instead! These and many other inaccuracies certainly diminish the authority of the book and prove that this text should not be taken too seriously.

However, Guiliano's biggest shortcoming remains her inability to acknowledge that food in France, as elsewhere, has different significance depending on social class. Her book, in fact, does not describe French women in general, but French women of the middle and upper classes; just as it does not speak to American women in general, but to American women of the middle and upper classes. Among the latter, one should even make an additional differentiation: There is a significant number of naïves and *nouveau riches* among the most enthusiastic readers and reviewers of *French Women Don't Get Fat*, whom the existence and message of this book reassures in their own jealously guarded social position.

Guiliano's writing formula is not new. By targeting a non - French audience, she is able to appear as a magician who has a lot to offer. We can applaud her upbeat writing style and her ability to engage the reader. Her recipes are good, although already known in France, which does not make her unique or original. For readers who are not very much into depth, who try to look sophisticated, *French Women Don't Get Fat*, is indeed a pleasant book to have on a French country style coffee table. It provides readers with may also be a a way to look sophisticated, and to become familiar with how someone wealthy with money had access to balanced food and, good wines and help to prepare these. Obviously Guiliano's her upbringing limits her ability to relate to any but the American bourgeoisie.

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