

## The deadliest sin

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### As Americans prepare to stuff themselves with turkey and pumpkin pie, two new books ask what's so bad about gluttony, anyway?

By Jim Holt, 11/23/2003

HERE ARE THREE propositions that sit together uneasily: 1) The United States is a deeply religious country. 2) Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. 3) Americans are the fattest people in the world.

The *absolute* fattest? Well, there may be a few South Sea islands where the people are heavier. But the United States, with 61 percent of its adults -- and one-quarter of its children -- overweight, certainly beats out everyone else. And that means there is a moral irony to be confronted, especially as we look forward to a national holiday later this week in which ritual overeating is deemed a gesture of gratitude for divine providence.

According to a 1998 Purdue University study, obesity is associated with higher levels of religious participation. (Broken down by creed, Southern Baptists have the highest body-mass index on average, Catholics are in the middle, and Jews and other non-Christians are the lowest.) When this finding was brought to the attention of the Reverend Jerry Falwell, he was unperturbed. "I know gluttony is a bad thing," Falwell said. "But I don't know many gluttons." That is one way out of the dilemma -- to deny that overweight people are necessarily sinful gluttons. But it could also be that gluttony is not really a sin.

What is so bad, in a moral sense, about eating extravagantly? As Sir Roy Strong stresses in his new book, "Feast: A History of Grand Eating" (Harcourt), the sybaritic pleasures to be gained from the copious consumption of food were regarded as perfectly honorable by the classical humanists. Nor is the idea that gastronomic indulgence is an outrage against the divine order to be found in the Bible. In "Gluttony," the latest in a series of short books on the seven deadly sins published by the Oxford University Press, Francine Prose observes that most of the feasting in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament "is, as it should be, celebratory, unclouded by guilt, regret or remorse."

It was not until the sixth century that Pope Gregory the Great classified gluttony -- along with pride, greed, lust, envy, anger, and sloth -- as one of the gravest perils to the soul. Theologians have come up with some rather odd justifications for this. One of them is that since the glutton worships his belly instead of God, he is guilty of a kind of idolatry. A second is that gluttony, though perhaps not so bad in itself, leads to other evils.

St. Thomas Aquinas -- a hefty fellow himself, as it happens -- declared that gluttony had "six daughters": "excessive and unseemly joy" are the first two, followed by "loutishness, uncleanness, talkativeness, and an uncomprehending dullness of mind." Others have claimed that gluttony paves the way to lechery. "When the belly is full to bursting with food and drink, debauchery knocks at the door," wrote the medieval German monk Thomas a Kempis. Now, there may be some validity to the "drink" part of that: After seven Cosmopolitans, people will do just about anything. But does a gargantuan repast really put one in the mood for fornication? More likely it conduces to slumbrous chastity.

In Dante's "Inferno," the gluttonous are consigned to an even lower circle of hell than the lecherous because of the sheer animal grossness of their vice. Gluttony may have seemed bestial to the Carthaginian church father Tertullian, who complained of the mass belching that soured the air at great Roman feasts. But there is more to this alleged vice than just stuffing one's face. Pope Gregory the Great identified five aspects to gluttony; eating *too soon, too delicately, too expensively, too greedily, and too much*. And no one has accused Americans of eating "too delicately." In fact, it may be our very lack of delicacy at the table that gets us into trouble on the scale.

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Take a look at Europe. Kingsley Amis, a sometime restaurant critic as well as a novelist, had a neat, two-dimensional way of sorting out European nations: England -- nice people, nasty food; France -- nice food, nasty people; Greece -- nice people, *terrifying* food; and so forth. Amis initially thought there was a perfect negative correlation here, that nice people invariably went along with nasty food and vice versa. But this hypothesis, he found, was defeated by the datum of Italy -- nice people, nice food!

Where one does turn up a strong inverse correlation, however, is between quality of national cuisine and fatness. The European countries that have the nicest food -- Italy, Switzerland, and France -- also have the lowest adult obesity rates, below 10 percent according to the latest figures from the International Obesity Task Force. The countries that have, shall we say, less nice food -- Greece, Finland, and Britain -- have the highest adult obesity rates, in excess of 20 percent.

Even in the age of celebrity chefs and the Food Network, there is still far more fuss over food in France than there is here in the United States. What American expatriate in Paris, for example, has not had to endure an excruciating dinner-party debate over the best wine to pair with white asparagus? (Vioignier, of course.)

If an "inordinate interest in food" is the mark of gluttony, as Prose herself says, then aren't the French as much a culture of gluttons as we are? They would, of course, prefer the nicer term *gourmand*, which has come to mean someone who loves food and eats for pleasure (even though *la gourmandise* remains the word for the deadly sin). The most discerning and cerebral of gourmands might claim the honorific of *gastronome* -- like the great Brillat-Savarin, who famously said that the discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of mankind than the discovery of a new star.

The French play up the epicurean side of gluttony, eating daintily and expensively; we play up the bestial side, eating excessively and greedily. In the eyes of Pope Gregory the Great, as he looks down upon us from heaven, we are all sinners.

And who are the most heroic of sinners? Literature affords some stunning images of gluttony -- think of Trimalchio's feast in the "Satyricon" of Petronius, or Rabelais's Gargantua. Among real-life gluttons, Prose describes the habits of the 19th-century American railroad magnate Diamond Jim Brady, who "would begin his meal by sitting six inches from the table and would quit only when his stomach rubbed uncomfortably against the edge."

In our own era, the veteran New York Times reporter R.W. "Johnny" Apple Jr., has quite a reputation as a gourmand. So storied is his worldwide quest

for both quality and quantity of victuals that he is called Three Lunches Apple (a nickname that he is said to like). In a recent profile in *The New Yorker*, Calvin Trillin (himself an eater of some renown) advances the theory that gluttony might have "saved" Apple by draining off some of his "outsized" competitiveness and drive. In this light, gluttony seems a benign passion that can transform the fiery and dangerous Citizen Kane into the avuncular Orson Welles of Almaden wine ads. Far from being a deadly sin, it could actually be an aid to salvation.

Could a certain kind of gluttony also, paradoxically, be an aid to thinness? Americans are certainly not getting fatter because they are eating more grandly. Consider the number of courses we consume at a meal. In the 19th century, as Strong reminds us in "Feast," a typical bourgeois dinner party ran to no fewer than 12 courses: hors d'oeuvre, two soups (one clear, one thick), fish, the entree, the joint or piece de resistance, a sorbet, roast and a salad, vegetables, a hot, sweet, ice cream dessert, coffee, and liqueurs. By the beginning of the 20th century, the number of courses had contracted to eight. In the 1950s, American etiquette books counseled five courses. Today you are lucky to get three.

The last time I had a proper antiquarian nine-course lunchit was at the Paris restaurant L'Arpege. It began, as I recall, with a warmed egg in its shell laced with maple syrup, followed by a plate of foie gras accompanied by a sweet millefeuille, then sweetbreads skewered on an anis stem, then a multicolored soup made from the leaves and petals of a flower I had not heard of and some part of the sea urchin which we are forbidden to eat in America, etc., etc. And the diners at the tables around me were all rather trim.

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Mealtime has evolved in other dramatic ways over the last 2,000 years, as Strong makes clear. Breakfast in 18th-century England was consumed as late as 11 o'clock, well into the work day, and dinner took place during daylight, at 4 or 5 p.m. With the establishment of the business day in the 19th century, dinner moved to 7 or 8 in the evening, pushing out the old meal of "supper"; breakfast was eaten before the start of work or, in France, scarcely at all; and the new meal of luncheon emerged. (Contrary to folk etymology, "luncheon" is not a *lunch* that takes an *eon*.)

Lately, the breakfast-lunch-dinner rhythm has been giving way to a new and distinctively American style of continuous food-consumption throughout the day, known as "snacking," "grazing," or "noshing." For the "vast majority of the population," Strong laments, "the idea of at least one meal in the day being a shared experience is gone forever."

If the grandeur of our eating is much diminished, our average caloric intake certainly isn't -- rather the opposite. As Greg Critser details in the recent book "Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World," agricultural policy under the Ford administration caused the price of industrial fat and high-fructose corn syrup to plummet. This opened up a new profit strategy to fast-food companies: supersizing. An order of french fries went from 200 calories in 1960 to 610 calories today. And appetites expanded accordingly. A 2001 study by nutritionists at Penn State University found that larger portions in themselves caused people to eat more. Meanwhile, Americans were working longer hours and squeezing in more meals away from home, which added to the appeal of calory-dense convenience foods.

Thus our expanding national girth is more a matter of economic forces than of moral failure. Yet, as Prose observes, many obese Americans still view their condition in terms of guilt and punishment. Those on group diets like Weight Watchers are especially prone to use religious language -- "sinner," "saint," "confession," "absolution" -- to describe their struggle. Perhaps we have not come so far from the sixth-century worldview of Pope Gregory the Great.

Such gloomy reflections must not be allowed to spoil the delight we take in our great national feast this Thursday. So as you sit down to Thanksgiving dinner, at a table groaning with savory dishes and rare vintages, silently recite the following conjugation before proceeding to stuff yourself: *I am a gastronome. You are a gourmand. He is a glutton.*

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